

RUTH'S CHOICE—AND OURS

(05/12/24)

Scripture Lessons: Ruth 1:1-18

1 John 3:14-18

John 10:11-21

*“Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there I will be buried.”* (Ruth 1:16)

Have you ever had an important decision to make in your life? Have you ever stood at a crossroads in your life and not known which path you should take? Have you ever had to make a decision of some consequence knowing full well that you don't have all the information you need to make an informed or enlightened decision? And yet you have to make the decision—you *have to*, one way or the other.

Ruth had to make just such a decision. Because of her courage in making her decision, because of her great faith, we are turning to her story today, on Mother's Day, as a source of inspiration for us all.

The Book of Ruth is the eighth book of the Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew scriptures. It was probably written between 450 and 250 B.C.E., perhaps in opposition to the prophet Nehemiah's attempt to prohibit or annul all mixed marriages. You can reference his screed at Neh. 13:23-25.

Although it is presented as history, the opening words of the book suggest a typical folk tale with no precise dating: “In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.” This is not unlike the opening words of many fairy tales that begin with “once upon a time . . .” or the beginning of many Armenian folk tales: “Once there was and there was not . . .” I love the way Armenians begin their fairy tales: “Once there was and there was not.” This helps us to understand that what the fairy tale is going to tell us may or may not be true literally; it may or may not be true historically, but it is deeply true psychologically and spiritually.

The Book of Ruth may indeed be an historical narrative. However, the story also speaks to us, to our spiritual and psychological condition. The opening scene of Ruth, which in a fairy tale usually informs us of the situation, the condition, the problem that needs to be solved, informs us that there is a famine in the land. This may, of course, refer to a literal famine. But a famine can mean other things as well. It can be used as a metaphor to depict an inner state of being.

If we think of famine as metaphor, we will realize that we have all experienced times of famine in our lives. A famine is a time of great want, a time when nothing grows. A famine is a time when we lose touch with the healing waters of life, when they no longer flow through us, through our land, through our people, through our culture. During a time of famine, we feel empty. We find ourselves focusing so much on ourselves, our own needs, our inner spiritual hunger, our deprivation, our survival, that we do not have the energy, the wisdom, or the joy to embrace the fullness of life, nor can we find it in us to reach out to others in compassion and love.

What do we do when we experience a time of psychological or spiritual famine? Not surprisingly, the Book of Ruth provides an answer! Instead of simply complaining about how unfair life has become, we can embark upon a journey!

This journey may be an outward journey, as in the journey one takes when leaving an abusive marriage and heading out into the unknown, the kind of journey Darlene's mother took as described in our May newsletter. It may be an outward journey, as in the journey one takes when looking for work after one's company has closed its doors, or when one is embarking upon a new life following retirement. It may be like the journey a young woman whom I know has taken to live with and help the indigenous peoples of Central America, a journey that has shaped her life. It may be an outward journey, as in the journey millions of immigrants have made in the last five centuries when they left their native lands and traveled to this country in the hope that they might be able to create a better life for themselves and for their families.

The journey that we undertake under the duress of a famine may also be an inward journey. It may have to do with finding a new attitude toward life. It may have to do with changing how we relate to the world, changing self-destructive patterns of behavior and relationship. It may have to do with discovering ourselves in a new way. It may have to do with changing our belief system, with allowing it to grow and evolve, with finding God or meeting Jesus again for the first time. Whether it is an outward journey or an inward journey or both, when we are experiencing a famine in our lives, we might look to Naomi and Ruth for guidance.

As described in the Book of Ruth, in the days when the judges ruled over Israel, a famine comes upon the land. "When the judges ruled" may indicate that the nation was guided by laws rather than the Holy Spirit; religious legalism may be the problem that needs to be solved. In any event, a certain man from Bethlehem of Judah journeys to the country of Moab with his wife and his two sons. The name of the man is Elimelech, and the name of his wife is Naomi.

The name "Elimelech" is an indication of the antiquity of the story since Elimelech, meaning "Melek is God," appears in the literature of ancient Palestine in the thirteenth century

B.C.E. but does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament. Elimelech and Naomi's two sons are Mahlon and Chilion. This family journeys to the country of Moab seeking that which they cannot find in their own land.

If Israel is the land of the patriarchy with its masculine, law-giving god, Yahweh, and Yahweh's representatives, the judges, Moab is the land of the matriarchy, the feminine, the land of the Great Mother, the goddess of nature. When our culture, religion, or even our individual psychology is suffering from a famine experience, much like a wilderness experience, we may need to recover that which has been lost. In our patriarchal culture and patriarchal religious tradition, what has been lost (or, more accurately, feared, persecuted, and repressed) is the feminine. The feminine, which Jesus incarnated and elevated in a way that was revolutionary for his time, can be the source of new life, of wholeness for us as individuals, as a culture, and as a church. The journey to Moab was successful and healing for the nation of Israel because it brought back the feminine in the person of Ruth, and this led to new life.

When Elimelech, Naomi's husband, dies in the land of Moab, Naomi is left with her two sons. The sons marry Moabite women, an unusual if not forbidden action for that time. The sons' wives are Orpah and Ruth. Then the sons both die of unknown causes.

Naomi is now left without husband or sons. She decides to return home from the country of Moab, for she has heard that the Lord has visited his people, Israel, and given them food again. This, of course, implies that Yahweh was responsible for visiting the famine upon his people in the first place. Naomi leaves the place where she is living and, with her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, begins the long journey back to the land of Judah.

Naomi kindly advises her two daughters-in-law, who, like her, are now widows, to return to their mothers' houses. She tells them that, as foreigners in Judah, she is not sure what kind of future they might have, for no Israelite man would be inclined to marry them. Orpah kisses her mother-in-law and returns to her family home. Ruth, however, chooses to continue the journey.

When Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, Naomi cleverly ensures that Ruth will be noticed by Naomi's wealthy relative, Boaz. Ruth does as Naomi instructs, and their plan works. Boaz is so captivated by Ruth's beauty, and he is so impressed by how kind Ruth has been to her mother-in-law, he takes her as his wife. Boaz and Ruth give birth to a child, Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse, who becomes the father of David. This is the reason why Ruth is listed as one of the descendants of David and therefore one of the descendants of Jesus.

Think about that brief moment where Ruth is confronted with a choice. She can turn back, as Orpah does. By the way, did you know that Oprah Winfrey's mother was trying to name her after Orpah but spelled her daughter's name incorrectly on the birth certificate? It's a

true story! Ask her! I have no idea why a mother would want to name her daughter after the daughter-in-law who turned back, just as I have no idea why the parents of a colleague of mine, whose name is Mahlon, would have named their son after a man whose name means “weakening” and who dies shortly after marriage. But that’s not the point.

Ruth knows the safe thing to do is to turn back, to cling to the known, to the people and the tradition that she knows. Ruth does not choose this option. She chooses to leave her family, her homeland, and her religion to reside in a new land and worship a new God. Ruth, because of her love for and devotion to her grief-stricken mother-in-law, embarks upon a journey into new life, just as Naomi and Elimelech had done in their journey to Moab many years before.

The matter of choice is a central theme of Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus chooses to be baptized. He chooses to respond to God’s call to become an itinerant teacher and healer. He chooses to enter Jerusalem during the last week of his life knowing full well what is to happen. He does so because he is the good shepherd, the one who lays down his life for his sheep. Like the good shepherd, Jesus is not a passive victim with respect to his crucifixion. He assures his followers, “No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.” Jesus makes the choice of sacrificial love.

The First Letter of John tells us that we are to model ourselves after Christ. Because Christ is the one who “laid down his life for us,” then “we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” This means that at times we will be called upon to make difficult, if not sacrificial choices. This means that to be true to ourselves, we must obey the inner commands of God no matter what the price.

People often describe their lives as if they were helpless. They say, “There was nothing else I could do.” “I had no choice.” They describe themselves as trapped, living lives of quiet desperation, constrained by a web of necessity and fate. Often, they blame other people or the past for the problems they are having in the present.

The French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, in his book entitled *Being and Nothingness*, asserts that that which makes us human, that which separates us from the animals is our ability to choose. Note that this is what Sartre said, not what I said. I have no doubt that our dog, Brie, and our grand-dog, Copley, make a lot of well-thought-out and strategic choices! They both have us wrapped around their little fingers, or, in their case, paws.

Sartre maintains that in every circumstance in life we have the freedom to choose. Even when we don’t realize we are choosing, we are choosing. All circumstances in life, even those that appear to be completely constricted, offer us room for choice. Viktor Frankl, the existentialist psychologist, maintains that even in the midst of a psychosis, of a schizophrenic

break, we can still make decisions. The ability to do this is never lost. I like what Frankl is saying; it probably helped him not only survive his death camp experience, but even rise above it. However, I think we all know that in cases of extreme dementia, our ability to make conscious decisions, to choose, can fade away and eventually disappear. In addition, when we listen carefully to people who are struggling with an addiction, it becomes apparent that they are not “choosing” to put the needle into their arm the same way you and I would choose to or choose not to.

For Sartre and Frankl, our lives are not a given, nor are they determined by our past. Rather, our lives are created. That we exist is a given. But we don't exist as human beings until we realize that we have freedom of choice and until we exercise that choice in the service of our authentic self-actualization. Sartre tells us that we create our lives through not only our major life decisions, but also through the thousands of little decisions we make every day. I like this. And I think it's true.

When the Hebrews arrived at the Promised Land, Joshua stood before them and said, “Choose this day whom you will serve.” In our scripture lesson this morning, Naomi stands before her daughters-in-law and presents them with the same choice. Orpah chooses to turn back. Ruth chooses not only to follow her mother-in-law to a new land; she also chooses to build her life around the God of Israel. Because of her faith, her courage, and the wisdom of her choice, she brings new life to Israel. She becomes the seed that bears fruit in King David and later in Jesus the Christ.

This morning, on Mother's Day, I would like us to think about the connection between motherhood and choice. We know the great sacrifice that mothers render for their children. They give of their bodies, their energy, and their time. If a woman has several children, she can figure on spending a third to a half of her life with a major portion of her time and energy devoted to her children. This is a major chunk of time out of a person's life! Since some members of the younger generations apparently seem to have difficulty launching, seem to have difficulty living independently and leaving home, this chunk of time can turn out to be even longer! But that's not my point. My point is that what makes this love an especially meaningful gift is that it is freely chosen.

Jesus tells us that the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. The shepherd is not a victim. *He loves unto death.* He gives his life rather than have it taken. A woman colleague of mine, after the birth of her third child, expressed her opinion that motherhood is a kind of death, but that it is the most beautiful kind of death; it shapes your soul to the core. I often think of that statement when I note the sacrificial love so many mothers extend to their children, especially if the child has special needs. They freely give a major portion of their lives to

nurture the lives of others. This is what makes their sacrifice so special. And it shapes their soul.

As we mentioned, Jesus is not the passive victim of his death. He chooses to go to Jerusalem. He could have chosen another road, an easier road. In 1 John 3:24 we are told that those who abide in Christ are those who have decided, like Christ, to obey the commands of God, even unto death. Most of the time, this does not mean physical death. It means the death of the ego, the death of our self-centeredness in order to be reborn in a state of Christ-centeredness, of God-centeredness.

Mother love is a special kind of love. It is a sacrificial love. Like Jesus' love, it is freely given. It arises from a choice that is courageous and affirming of life, just as Ruth's choice was courageous and affirming of life. If this is what God's love is like, and it must be since this is the love that was shown to us in Jesus, it is both comforting and challenging, calling us to choose our path in life with the assurance that God, who is both our mother and our father, walks it with us.

This can be comforting in those moments when we, like Ruth, need to make a choice.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
May 12, 2024*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.