**From Lament to Hope and Gratitude**

**Narrative Lectionary**

**October 13, 2019**

Ruth 1: 1-17 Russell Mitchell-Walker

In a community like ours, we can become aware of the challenges and tragedies that others’ experience, or if we are going through them, hopefully we experience the love and support of those in the community. It can be important during these times to remember that while we may reach out shortly after a loss or tragedy, that the pain, lament, and sadness can continue on for months and years afterwards. In our community here at Eastside, we have had loss of children by sudden death and estrangement, loss or severe illnesses of siblings and parents, nephews and nieces. Have you felt the support of God through times of grief and challenge through the love and support of others? Do you still ask the question of why, and be angry at God. This is all part of the process. Through these times, we grieve and lament, and sometimes need to sit with the sadness and those of us supporting can help by being present and being with the sadness.

Naomi, in our story today felt both the support and the bitterness of her pain, lamenting with the feeling that God has turned against her. She was supported by her daughters-in-law after the death of her husband and then through the death of her sons’ their husbands. All three experienced difficult grief together. Finally, Naomi decided she could not stay in Moab any longer, and heard that the famine in her country of Bethlehem was over. She encouraged both Ruth and Orpah to go back to their families there in Moab. They resisted as they had formed a bond with Naomi and did not want to leave her. Naomi convinced Orpah to go, with an argument that she would not likely bear any more sons for them to marry. But Ruth clung to Naomi. A stronger bond had formed that Ruth refused to break. She had become so close to Naomi that she would not leave her, as she continued to grieve. Her famous words have become popular at weddings:

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 will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
   and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!’

Ruth a Moabite, part of a culture and group of people despised and rejected by the Israelites, agrees to go to a foreign land with Naomi, and change religions out of love and support for her. Through this act of incredible kindness, or hesed, love and support, Ruth continues on the journey with Naomi, and back in Bethlehem marries, and gives birth to a son, who is an ancestor of David and Jesus. Ruth is very like the God she has chosen to embrace, a Yahweh who will never depart from us and will forever offer to us a *chesed*, an unbreakable love, which will never leave us alone. That love also led to giving hope back to Naomi with the birth of a grandson.

This is also a story of Ruth being welcomed into and finding belonging to a community long before she understood what the community believes let alone what she believed herself. Only after she is accepted and loved, did she make the decision to become a believer. This is a Celtic tradition of evangelization - bring people into loving relationship and accompaniment and through that relationship they come to faith. This also reflects the shift the church has needed to make in recent years from a model of membership that was belief first, then behaviour then belonging, to one of belonging, behaviour, belief. People are looking to find community and then will sort out what they believe within that community if they find belonging.

This summer I began reading a book called [Church Forsaken](https://www.pastahj.com/books), by Jonathan Brooks, who was also at [Skylight Festival](http://www.skylightfestival.ca). It is about his journey as a pastor, who has moved back into the neighbourhood he grew up in, Englewood in Chicago, that has a reputation for a lot of crime and challenges. There is a story in it that reflects well the importance of creating a community of belonging. Jonathan, who became known as Pastah J found himself thrown into being a pastor of a Baptist church with virtually no training, only the experience of working with the youth and young adults in the church and community. He was preparing for his first Mothers’ Day service, which in the black church is as big a Sunday as Christmas and Easter. He had prepared for weeks and felt ready as he stepped up to the pulpit and offered prayer before preaching. Then he looked up and saw a young man come in from outside and motion to anther young man to come outside. The one called outside was Dionte who Jonathan knew from his youth group, and the other one was a friend Dionte had brought a few times. Just as Dionte got on the front steps, a group of guys rushed him and started to beat him. Yelling, “Somebody help Dionte!” Pastah J saw a group of men jump up and run to Dionte’s aid. There was a deacon who was a police officer who yelled at them to stop, to no avail, so he pulled out his gun and shot it in the air. Everyone stopped and the guys scattered. Jonathan was quite distressed, as you can imagine, about the whole incident and reflected on how God brought the neighbours to them. A few weeks later he was able to sit down with Dionte and wanted to apologize for how naïve they had been as a congregation and should have been more aware of who was coming in and out of the sanctuary. Before he could apologize, Dionte interrupted him:

“Jay, I just wanna thank ya’ll for what you did for me.”

A little confused with the statement, I looked up and asked, “what do you mean?”

He replied quickly, “I don’t know no other church that would have had my back like y’all did!”

A little smirk came on his face as he continued and said, “you know, I don’t necessarily get down with the church thing, but ya’ll really showed me something that day. I keep telling my boys that it was the church people in they’ suits and ties on the steps holding it down and they can’t believe it!”

I was not sure how to respond. All my Christian doctrine and theology led me to believe that there was no way that what had happened was a good thing. Yet as we sat having conversation, I saw this young man connecting with our church in a genuine manner for the first time. He wanted to come back personally and thank all the men who had protected him, some of whom he did not even know. He also commented that he wanted to start bringing he sisters and little brother to church as well.

He told me, “I know that my family needs this kind of positivity in our lives and my mom hasn’t been able to get them there, but I will.”

As I listened to him describe his connection to the congregation, all my previous notions of how people connect with the church began to be dismantled. No one had walked this young man down the “Romans Road” to salvation…But the people of God sacrificed their safety and their own lives in order to save his, and that was having far more impact than the countless bibles studies and sermons he had sat through in the youth group or on Sunday morning. I learned in that moment…what finally connected was the truth that when things got crazy and he needed help, the church was there for him.

Dionte did return to thank the congregation. After they were done, Pastah J said: “After listening and learning from this young man, I now realize that we can forget about being successful or saving souls or whatever else we were doing before Mother’s Day. What God has revealed to me is that we won’t even survive in Englewood until we learn to love all our neighbours the way we love this young man. This is what it means to be the church where love makes the difference.”

Dionte came to a place of knowing he belonged and was loved, which led him on a journey toward belief.

Ruth was a foreigner in a strange land, even an outcast, but because of her relationship with Naomi and then her family, she was welcomed and became part of the family and the community. This past two weeks a few of us have been attending a “Grow your Church” workshop that focuses on how we welcome newcomers. One of the insights from this week was that while those whose ‘job’ it is to welcome and greet – the greeters and congregational care greeter in our case – need to be friendly, it can be discounted if a guest does not experience friendliness and welcome from others as well. It is up to all of us to welcome and be friendly to those who are new. I have heard from newcomers that we do a pretty good job, so let’s keep it up and learn what more we can do. Some suggestions from the workshop are things like

* don’t sit in the same place, don’t sit alone, be a community together,
* don’t do church business in the first five minutes before church or the five to 15 minutes after church.
* Pay attention to those who may be alone during coffee time, and include them or engage in conversation with them, and
* know that someone can feel like a newcomer even after being in a church for a few years.

We are blessed to have people who do some of this naturally, and it is something to be thankful for as we continue to work toward being a welcoming community!

As we gather on this Thanksgiving Sunday, I wish to invite us to think about the love and support you have experienced in this community and within your family, including your chosen family. Where have you felt welcomed and experienced belonging? May we give thanks for this and share it with others before this day, this weekend is over.