

Sermon 100415 Loyalty
Scripture Ruth 1: 1-22
Sermon Title I'm With You

The Christian Education Committee and I are trying something new this month. We are matching up the readings that the Sunday school is working on to what we hear and I preach on in worship. This month they are working on the Hebrew Bible book of Ruth so I'll be preaching on Ruth in October.

Ruth is a short somewhat obscure book found between Judges and Samuel. It is one of only two books in the Bible named after women. The other one is Esther. The book of Ruth takes place in the time of Judges. The book of Judges is a disaster. It is one violent scene after another. It is a war book. War and violence is the backdrop to the book of Ruth. Ruth is a peaceful story in a world of war.

I'd like to set this up by telling you the overall story of Ruth and then go back the beginning, which is what I'm preaching on. An Israelite named Elimelech left Israel with his wife Naomi and his two sons and moved to the country of Moab, modern day Jordan. The two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, married Moabite women, Orpha and Ruth.

Then terrible things happened and the father and both sons died. That left Naomi with no husband or sons facing a life of destitution. She had her two daughter-in-laws whom she told to

return to their Moabite families and avoid also living destitute lives. Orpha kissed Naomi goodbye and returned to her family but Ruth stayed with Naomi.

Together they return to Israel to a town you might of heard of named Bethlehem. Then we have a classic ‘boy meets girl’ story. Boaz is a fairly prosperous and very good man in town. He is also a distant relative of Elimelech. He owns fields. Ruth volunteers to go out and collect grain that the harvesters leave behind from Boaz’ fields.

Ruth, we can assume, was attractive as she caught eye of Boaz. They fell in love, got married, gave birth to a son and they all lived happily ever after. Ruth’s son becomes the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David, the greatest of the Hebrew kings. So, this short and nice story also put’s Ruth in the important place of being the great grandmother of David.

Okay, so that’s the short version of a fine Biblical short story. So let’s take a look at the beginning of the story and see what we might find.

The first chapter tells the story of a Jewish couple living outside Israel in a foreign land with their two sons. The sons marry young women who are native to the land they are living in, Moab. Tragically, all three men die. An early message to the Jews is that when you leave Israel, bad things happen. Moses and the

Hebrew people went through so much so they could have their promised land, moving away is a bad idea.

So we have three widows who are in dire straits. Naomi tells her daughter-in-laws to go back to their Moabite people where they can be cared for, which is what Orpah does. But Ruth is loyal to Naomi and refuses to leave her. Ruth utters the most famous words in the book, “Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die, I will die and there I will be buried.” (1: 16)

Ruth did this with the knowledge that she would likely be destitute for the rest of her life because of that decision. The loyalty and love between Naomi and Ruth is the most positive portrayal of women’s relationship in biblical literature.

The loyalty that Ruth shows to Naomi is a loyalty of, well, biblical proportions. It begs the question, ‘Am I capable of that level of loyalty? Are you?’ The famous and beautiful quote from Ruth that we just heard is in the liturgy of weddings that I perform. A favorite part of Celebrations and Concerns during our worship service is the announcement of wedding anniversaries. The applause that follows is well deserved.

I want to tell you a story about marriage loyalty that I absolutely love. Meg and I have a friend named Dick who is a retired minister although remains super busy. He lost his wife maybe five years ago for the second time. The first time he lost her was to Alzheimer's years earlier.

When I was in seminary, I was a substitute pastor at UCC Norwell for a month as one of the pastors was on sabbatical and the other was on vacation. I arranged to go with Dick to visit Helen in an Alzheimer's unit in Jamaica Plain. We arrived in her room and Dick gave Helen a hug and a kiss and started talking to her about what's going on in an upbeat manner. He introduced me and chattered away. Helen did not utter a sound and had that thousand-mile stare that loved ones of Alzheimer's victims know well.

Helen was able to mouth the words when we said the Lord's Prayer together but still no sound. We took a walk, Dick bought cookies, and we sat on a bench overlooking Jamaica Pond. Dick told me the story of when they met and how they became an item. They were the only Stevenson supporters in the group of Eisenhower supporters. Dick chattered away as if all was normal. We brought her to the room. Dick gave her a hug and kiss goodbye and we left.

We got into his car to go home. I hesitated but asked the question I had to ask. I said, “Dick, how can you do this? Helen doesn’t even know who you are.” Dick said, “I know who I am and I know who Helen is.” That’s when I said to myself, ‘That’s the kind of husband I want to be.’ That’s why we have language at weddings like, ‘for better, for worse, for richer for poorer, ‘til death does us part.’

We have a support group for caregivers of folks with memory loss in our church. There are stories shared that are as heart wrenching as the one I just told you and as heart warming as Dick and Helen and Naomi and Ruth. I invite you to join us if you are in a like situation. Our next meeting is in the Leland Room on Sat Oct 17 at 9:30AM. Great support and good information is to be found there.

Of course, loyalty between individuals is not restricted to marriage. Naomi and Ruth are examples. With a few exceptions, my best friends today I made in high school. One of my high school buddies was here last month and went on the Blue Hills hike with the Youth Ministry. Meg told the youth that Dennis and I are friends all the way back to high school. Dennis piped up and said, “Yes, I’m here to tell you that Pastor Jim really does have a friend.”

Do we have Naomi and Ruth level loyalty and love in our church? You bet! Do we witness it beyond our doors? Of course. Is it the right way to live this life? Definitely. Let us continue to inspire each other with stories of loyalty, love, and devotion. Let us inspire the world. AMEN