

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

November 11, 2018, The 25th Sunday After Pentecost/The 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time

Ruth 1:1-18, Mark 12:28-34

A FRIEND LIKE RUTH

If you have ever moved to a new part of the country, or a new part of the world, you know how disorienting it can be.

It can be little things: are you drinking soda or pop when you order a Diet Pepsi?

If you invite someone to your house for the evening meal, do you invite them for supper or dinner?

If you are in middle school or high school when you move, what types of clothes are popular and which ones are distained? And does anyone else listen to your kind of music?

As adults, if you're told that the dress is casual for an event; what does that mean in New York, or Iowa, or Illinois, or Colorado?

And if you are a church-going person: do people wear suits to church, do the women wear dresses, and can you wear jeans or shorts without catching the evil eye of church grandmas?

Part of the disorientation in moving is that nothing even looks familiar. I felt this when I moved from home in Washington State to seminary in New Jersey. I couldn't even recognize the names of grocery store chains or department stores because back in the ancient days none of them were the same.

And the year I lived outside of Belfast in Groomsport, Northern Ireland was even more disorienting. We may have all been speaking English, but our words didn't always have the same meaning or pronunciation.

My sweater was a jumper, my jumper was a pinafore, my pants were trousers and my underwear were pants (which I kept forgetting, much to the amusement of the youth group).

I felt physically exhausted at the end of those first weeks,
as I learned to drive on the other side of the road,
and cross the street without being hit by a car coming from the wrong direction..

And that was nothing compared to negotiating all the cultural differences; especially those unspoken rules of a given place that no amount of reading can teach you.

And I know that my move to Groomsport, Northern Ireland was nothing compared to all the differences that those of you who have come to us from Togo have experienced, as you have entered into American culture and American English and American customs.

Sometimes when we change cultures, from different parts of the United States, or different parts of the world, we don't even know what questions to ask to help us navigate our new home.

We are surrounded by risk, disorientation, fears, uncertainty and change.

Ruth would have also felt all of these things and more when she said to her mother-in-law Naomi:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;

where you lodge, I will lodge;

your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.”

We don't hear Ruth asking Naomi questions about the land of Israel,
she didn't ask about Hebrew customs,
she didn't ask for language lessons,
or what to wear to the Temple in Jerusalem;
she simply said: “Yes, I'm going with you and you can't make me turn back.”

But there are so many questions she could have asked. She was a woman from the nation of Moab who was going to the Hebrew nation of Israel.

She didn't speak the same language.
She didn't eat the same foods,
She didn't know the customs,
She practiced a different religion.
She would be a foreigner in a strange land where nothing would be familiar. (Feasting, p. 246.2. 4)

She was going to a land where she would always be considered an outsider.
She was from the land of Moab, who had always been enemies of Israel.
She was the widow of a mixed marriage with a Hebrew man.
She was a widow, traveling with another widow Naomi, who had been away from Bethlehem for years.
As two widows in their culture they had no power because they
had no man of their family to stand for them, protect them or speak for them.
(Feasting, p. 244.1.1)

And yet Ruth said, “no matter what happens I am going with you; I will be your family.”
Ruth had a fierce loyalty and love for Naomi that was stronger than:
risk, disorientation, fears, uncertainty and change,
and Ruth said yes!
Yes I will be your family,
yes I will go where you go,
yes I will worship your God with you.

This morning we could talk about how Ruth gives us a picture what true and deep friendship looks like. Her life shows us friendship that comes from the heart.

And yet what I'd like to suggest this morning is that Ruth's life also gives us a picture of what it means for each of us to follow Jesus. Because in all honesty, while following Jesus can bring comfort, it can also bring:
risk, disorientation, fears, uncertainty and change.

When we follow Jesus we are called to a new way of life.
Following Jesus asks each of us to borrow Ruth's words, and her fierce loyalty and love and say:
“Jesus: Where you go, I will go;

Where you lodge, I will lodge;
 your people shall be my people,
 and your God my God.”

And when we say that to Jesus, he gives us the two great commandments to guide us, the same ones he discussed with the teacher of the law long ago:

First: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

And the second commandment is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

And when we truly take the path of Ruth and say we’ll follow Jesus wherever he guides us in life we can be guaranteed that not only will there be salvation, love, comfort and peace,
 But there will be:

risk, disorientation, fears, uncertainty and change.

So while it would be more comfortable to stay in our own “Moabs,” where life is familiar, and we know the language, and we know the customs and the expectations,
 faith asks us instead to hear Jesus’ call to follow,
 that comes to us each and every day of our lives, asking us to daily take the risk of
 “loving the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our
 mind, and with all our strength,
 and loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

Then we too can use the courage of Ruth as we say:

“Jesus: Where you go, I will go;
 where you lodge, I will lodge;
 your people shall be my people,
 and your God my God.”

May it be so for you and me and this community of faith. Amen