

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

**November 14, 2021, The 25th Sunday After Pentecost/The 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Lectionary for Pent 23/Ord 30)**

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

CHOOSING TO LIVE LIKE RUTH FROM MOAB

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: when you order a Diet Pepsi, are you drinking soda or pop?

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 accepted and which ones will get you labelled? And does anyone else listen to your kind of music, or watch your TikToks?

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 Washington?

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

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 those ancient days, none of them were the same.

The year I lived outside of Belfast in Groomsport, Northern Ireland, as a student pastor, 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 or preparing 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 felt all of those 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 Judah.

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 enemy outsider. In the PW Women's Bible Study two weeks ago, we learned together what a huge divide there was between Moab and Israel. They shared a long history of warfare. It made us appreciate even more the risk that Ruth took in coming back to Bethlehem with Naomi.

From the moment of her arrival, she would be labelled as the foreigner from Moab.
 Hers would be the face of the enemy in her new home.

Plus, she was the widow of a mixed marriage with a Hebrew man, in a nation that valued racial purity.

Plus, 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)

There were so many reasons for Ruth to follow the sensible decision of Orpah and return to her mother's home when Naomi decided to leave Moab for Bethlehem.

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,

She had a fierce loyalty and love that was stronger than all the reasons of nation, race and religion that divided them.

And so Ruth said yes!

Yes, I will be your family,
 Yes, I will go where you go,
 Yes, your people will be my people,
 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 that is a sermon for another day.

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 continually borrow Ruth's words, and her fierce loyalty and love and say:

"Jesus: Yes, I will be your family,
 Yes, I will go where you go,
 Yes, your people will be my people,
 Yes, I will worship your God with you.

And when we say that to Jesus, he gives us the two great commandments we heard in Mark's gospel to guide us:

"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.

And really, if there were ever words to label what 2020 and 2021 have brought us then "risk, disorientation, fears, uncertainty and change," sure seem to be the labels that fit.

It must also be said that while we have our own stories, emotions and beliefs about all that 2020 and 2021 have held, and what is true and what is false, so do the people in our families, in our church, in our circle of friends, our schools, our community and our country.

And I'm not telling you something you don't know when I say that we are telling very different stories, aren't we?

We are divided in so many ways by what we believe, feel, and think about these past 20 months.

The anger, sadness, and brokenness that have divided families and friends and communities seem to be a lasting legacy of this world pandemic.

Like the Israelites and the Moabites from long ago, many of us are entrenched in what we believe about each other, and we treat each other accordingly.

But as followers of Jesus, we are commanded to not let this be the end of the story. We follow a Savior who asks us to pray for our enemies. We follow Jesus who calls us to the radical, dangerous, difficult pathway of love.

Jesus calls us to have the eyes and heart of Ruth and Naomi, who saw past what divided them to what was more true.

On paper they should not have been friends, let alone family, but they chose to move past the divisions to what and Who united them.

The pathway of Ruth and Naomi, and the call of Jesus to us in these changeable days, asks everything of us. It takes heart, soul, mind and strength to be people of faith. It takes practice. It isn't easy.

You can be guaranteed that there will be risk, disorientation, fears, uncertainty and change.

Faith asks us to see past labels, entrenched disagreements, tightly held beliefs and truths, voting practices, masking practices, and racial and ethnic separations to the people on the other side of the divide. And then when we have seen them, really seen them, to love God first and then to love those "Moabites" as we love ourselves.

Faith asks us to not let "risk, disorientation, fears, uncertainty and change" have the final word.

Faith asks us to look at the "Moabites" who are not like us, and see children of God.

Knowing that this is the pathway Jesus commands us to follow, may we have the courage of Ruth to say with our hearts, souls, minds and strength:

"Jesus: Yes. I will be your family,
 Yes, I will go where you go,
 Yes, your people, all your people, will be my people,
 Yes, I will worship you God.

May this be so for you and me, and this community of faith, through the strong grace and love of our Savior Christ. Amen

Bartlett, David L. and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 – Reign of Christ)*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009.