



"Return to the House of Bread"

a sermon by

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Charlotte, NC

November 1, 2006

Our Scripture this afternoon comes to us from the book of Ruth, chapter 1: 1-18. In the Jewish tradition this book is read in its entirety during the Feast of Weeks, a celebration that marks the end of the grain harvest and the giving of the Torah to the people- God's gift of covenant relationship with Israel. So this story is seasonal, in a sense, but also timeless.

“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again.

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good by, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “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. Where you die, I will die- there will I be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death parts me from you!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.”

“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 deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death parts me from you!” It is hard to match the poetry of these words. It seems that in the gamut of the Biblical cannon, there are actually very few statements of love and devotion that could parallel this one in terms of beauty. It is possible that the last time you heard these lines was at a wedding service- this tends to be a favorite among couples seeking an expression for their love in the scriptures, and Ruth doesn't tend to upset folks

like Song of Solomon does. It does always strike me as a bit odd that the scriptures can be considered so inappropriate for church! But I digress. We're talking about Ruth, and when we think about Ruth we think about love, and what is there not to love about that? I won't follow this statement with a 'but.' But I would like to follow it with an 'and.' 'What is there not to love about that' *and* there is far more story to be told here. When we take a step back from Ruth clinging to Naomi with the same devotion (and verb) with which a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cling to his wife in the book of Genesis, we see that our first impression of the devotion described here just barely stirs the surface of the depth of commitment that is being made.

In the eyes of the culture Ruth, by all accounts, is moving in the wrong direction when she steps out toward Bethlehem with Naomi. Naomi has lost her husband, and she has lost her sons therefore her social capital is utterly bankrupt. The great irony of the story is that, in order to escape famine, she had moved with her husband out of Bethlehem, which literally means, 'the house of bread' because of its crops, to Moab, a place of plenty but where all that Naomi has and loves is stripped away by death. It appears that famine of every sort haunts this woman and now it would seem that neither the world nor God has anything left to offer her, nor she them. "The Lord has dealt bitterly with me," she says. "The hand of the Lord has turned against me." So certainly Ruth's statement of devotion defies any self-interest on her part to say the least. Throwing in her lot with a childless widow was truly to abide with the 'least of these' whereas Orpah exits stage left with her common sense, her dignity, her blessing, and her future in hand. She is free to find another husband and regain her status in the community as one who can carry on a line and a name- the most important role for the women of the day.

But Ruth does not just turn aside from any sense of self interest, she relinquishes her self-preservation as well. While death may have transformed her from woman to widow she now has the opportunity to return to her homeland, Moab, and to rebuild her life but she refuses. Not because the borders were too dangerous to cross, but because of her commitment to Naomi, who was returning to the land of her people Israel. But Israel loathed the Moabites. The author makes it a point to mention in many ways and about a dozen times in a few short verses that Ruth was a foreigner and this detail is not to be overlooked. Throughout history the Moabites had been despised and rejected by Israel, the people of God, largely because of a history of abusive and shameful encounters with the country when the two met. Moabites also did not regard the religious laws of the Hebrews and so had been banned from 'the assembly' - kind of like a religious UN- for generations. Any claims to citizenship for Ruth died with her husband and so she was an immigrant with no legal status, no family, and no resources.

With all this in mind, then, Ruth's pledge of allegiance is really quite staggering. As a woman heading into a great unknown traveling with one of the lowest common denominators of society she professes, "Where you go, I will go (and) where you lodge, I will lodge;" Headed for Bethlehem, and the Israelites who disdain the very idea of her she says, 'your people shall be my people', and adopting a faith that is not her own, "your God (shall be) my God. Where you die, I will die- there will I be buried." Ruth embodies what one scholar calls the 'spirit of Abraham.' That spirit that commits itself to the risky business of total dependence upon God and ventures out in that committed dependence far beyond what any rational human being would consider safe

or appropriate, or sane for that matter and who ultimately finds blessing and becomes an instrument of blessing to others. She embodies the spirit of Abraham that testifies to us that we have to be willing to risk dependence upon God's current, continuing, and future action and activity for without risk there is no reward.

For the story of Ruth of course does not end in the first chapter with her commitment to Naomi. It ends with her restoring hope and life to this widow, and bringing a family together that had been scattered to the wind and the sheaves. It ends with her bearing a son that would be the father of Jesse, who would be the father of David, the great king of Israel, from whom would descend a man named Joseph whose wife was Mary who had a child named Jesus. And it all began with a woman who stepped out in faith and a fierce commitment to God's people whom she loved. "(And we are left with the challenge and the promise that the one) who steps out in faith becomes the one through whom God will act."¹

Ruth and Naomi hear that the famine is over and so return to Bethlehem, the house of bread, just in time for the harvest. And there they find that the God who ends famine has in mind new life for them as well. This should come as no surprise, really. After all, Bethlehem is a town where newness is born.² And there is plenty of bread to go around. Amen.

¹ Lawrence Farris, The Lectionary Commentary, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005, p. 160-162.

² Kathleen A. Robertson, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Nashville, Abingdon, 1998, p. 908.