

WORSHIP

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Fruits of the Spirit: Joy

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Galatians 5:1, 16, 22-25

Ruth 1:1-18

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, 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 do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Good morning. It is good to be back with you – my congregation – after being in Kansas City last week where I preached for a friend who was on sabbatical.

On my way home – in the car on the way to the airport, as I sat in the terminal waiting out a delayed flight, and on the tarmac at Charlotte Douglas International, I had a delightful theological conversation over text message with a college student from our church.

One of the things I love about ministry – and Christian discipleship – is that it happens anywhere and everywhere...even in an Uber or on an airplane.

As if the Holy Spirit was showing off – on Tuesday, when I turned my thoughts to this Sunday’s Scripture – and our new sermon series that begins today – I was struck that my text-message conversation really centered around the same issue that the Apostle Paul seeks to address in his letter to the Galatians. Paul, of course, helped establish a church in Galatia (which is modern day Turkey). This letter that we have in the Bible is Paul’s attempt to answer and address some of the questions or the issues that members of that community were having. If Paul carried an iPhone, he might have just texted with them. Instead, he wrote a letter in Greek and, well...we get to read it all of these years later.

The question was whether those who Jesus saved had to **do** anything to keep their salvation intact. There was also the corollary to that question – if they didn’t have to do anything, if salvation was assured, why would people make faithful decisions at all?

Those are really good questions and – if my text-message exchange is an indicator – they remain questions that people of faith continue to ask.

The Apostle Paul’s answer to those questions is clear: Because of what Jesus did for us, we are free from the law – from the burden of needing to DO SOMETHING to earn or keep our identity as a child of God, because we are saved, not by our efforts or actions, but by God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

Additionally – here’s the key – Paul wants us to know that this freedom is an opportunity to live in a different way. Paul says it this way, “**For** freedom, Christ has set us free.” Because we are saved – redeemed – relieved from needing to worry about or earn our place in God’s heart – because Christ has delivered us from that burden – we are free to live by the spirit.

Paul continues: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”



And then, because any good preacher knows it is important to offer illustrations and examples, Paul gives us a list. He calls them the “fruits of the spirit” – what it looks like when we are living into this freedom that Christ gives us. And the fruits of the spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If you want know what it looks like to believe in and follow Jesus – Paul says – to practice your freedom – it looks like that list.

All of that to say – for the next five weeks in worship – here is what we are going to do: We are going to take some of those fruits of the spirit – and we’re going find a story in the Bible that illustrates what that fruit looks like when it is lived out.

Hopefully, this exercise will guide us in our ongoing work of embracing what it means to claim our freedom – to leave behind those things we think we have to do in order to somehow earn or keep this gift that God has given us in knowing that we belong – to shed that weight, that baggage – in order that we can bear fruit.

Our fruit today is joy.

And our illustration comes from the book of Ruth.

So as we prepare to hear this Scripture, let us pray: *Good and gracious God – as we spend this time letting your word work on us – I pray that you would open our hearts and our minds that we might receive fresh insight. And that – later – as we leave this place – you might continue to speak to us and through us. We make this prayer in the name of Jesus – your word made flesh. Amen.*

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Alright. Before I read this story from Ruth – and if you want to follow along it is on page 241 in your pew Bibles – but before I read there are few things you need to know:

First – let’s do some geography. This is a story that takes place in Moab. To the Jews who would have first heard this story – they would know that the country of Moab is a bad place – a foreign place – other – and the mention of Moab (Ruth – a main character in the story – was a Moabite) would bring up all kind of negative connotations.

Second – it is important to know that widows, in this time, were some of the most vulnerable of all people. And within Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel) – foreign widows were even more vulnerable. Widows could not work – and if they did not have extended family, they depended on the charity of the community – they would get their food by gleaning the produce of the fields – collecting the leftovers – the scraps – after the harvest.

Third – for women – and especially widows – marriage was the only link to security. Being



married meant being connected to a network of support. Having children – especially sons – was (like it or not) a primary role for women in that time – because a son would continue to build the legacy and the wealth of a family.

With this in mind, let us listen for the word of God from the first chapter of Ruth.

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One of the many perks of my job is that I get to witness – up close and personal – some of the most joy-filled moments in people’s lives.

One of those moments is when I get to stand right about there and ask a usually nervous couple to repeat after me and make promises to one another that bind them together in marriage.

I take you to be my wife, and I promise to be your loving husband.

I take you to be my husband, and I promise to be your loving wife.

That’s the easy part. Then come the specifics:

In plenty and in want.

In joy and in sorrow.

In sickness and in health.

As long as we both shall live.

I never hear those words without thinking about Dick Gibbons. I first met Dick after my first sermon as a pastor, when, instead of coming through the line to shake my hand and say “good job,” Dick handed me a small clay pot with a sprig of ivy. “This comes from a vine that grows at Windsor Castle,” Dick told me. “I took a sample when I was in England about ten years ago and have been growing it ever since. I wanted to give it to you as a housewarming present.”

I took the pot of ivy, secretly hoping that Dick had much more of the sample at his house, because I knew that whatever plant entered my house didn’t stand a chance of making it out alive.

Dick was that congregation’s Dianne Maye. If you don’t know Dianne Maye – she is the saint who orders (or grows) and arranges the flowers that help make this place of worship holy and beautiful. Dick was a horticulturalist who worked for the city of Richmond.

It didn’t take me long to figure out where Dick’s pew was in the sanctuary. You know that a number of people tend to sit in the same pew, week to week, right? I could always tell where Dick was sitting because his pew – near the front on the left side – was a lot shorter than the others. He had worked with Property Committee so that we had least one pew in the sanctuary that was cut short enough to provide space for a wheelchair. Dick wanted to make



sure that his wife, Jean, had a place to worship – not out in the aisle where she might feel self-conscious and different – but within the community.

Almost 50 years before I met Dick, he and Jean stood in the front of that sanctuary and repeated their vows to one another. They spent about 15 years enjoying what they thought was a normal life. They had two children. Work was steady. But then Jean began to show symptoms. They never really nailed a diagnosis, but it was a disease that eroded her physical and mental health. By the time their kids were in late elementary school, Jean couldn't get around without her chair. She was angry – as I would be – and she was confused.

Dick moved the family to a house that had better access. He took the lead with raising the kids. He worked hard every day – not only to care for Jean – but to include her in parenting – in their social life – in his work – in church.

By the time I came around, Jean's disease was quite advanced. She was pretty belligerent most of the time, and she took out more and more of her frustrations on Dick.

When I got to know Dick a little better – and after I confessed that I had killed his housewarming gift within a matter of weeks – I remember asking him if all that he had done for Jean over the years was difficult.

"Of course," he said. "But we made promises. We had a pretty good run of health. Now it is sickness. In all of it – there is joy."

Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people; your God will be my God; where you die, I will die.

I read those words that Ruth spoke so long ago to Naomi standing about right there at a lot of weddings, even though they have nothing to do with marriage, per se. Even so, they are relevant because what Ruth says describes the kind of commitment that transcends self-interest – a way of living that goes beyond happiness and into the realm of joy. And that's what it is to be in a healthy relationship – whether it is marriage, or not.

Ruth made that promise to Naomi in spite of Naomi's repeated objection.

Naomi was right – she knew that the smart decision for Ruth would be to leave – to go home – to take care of herself. That's what Orpah, Naomi's other daughter-in-law did. I don't fault her for that. A future with Naomi offered no security – no guarantees – uncertainty.

But – then as now – Ruth was faced with that choice between the sensible thing and the right thing. Between looking after herself or honoring the connection she had to another. Between short-term happiness or long-term joy.

Then as now, one of the reasons life is so interesting and unpredictable is that we don't always know when we will face those choices. Sometimes we do – like when stand in front of a congregation to take marriage vows – but most of the time we don't. That choice between



the sensible thing and the right thing tends to present itself in midst of the everyday – like for Ruth and Naomi, on the way from one place to another – or for Dick Gibbons, in the thousands of choices he made to honor his commitment – or for you, in your work, or at school, or in the ways you invest your time or your energy, in your relationships.

In whatever the circumstance, those choices come.

And when they do, whether we plan for them or stumble into them, what I hope we can remember is that we have been given the freedom to choose what is **right** – what is full of **joy** – because we don't need to worry about our security, or cling tightly to our self-interest – we are freed from the need of that because we belong to the One who has already given our lives worth and hope and purpose and peace.

We are free to choose joy – and we never know how God will use our choices for God's purpose.

Ruth made that choice, and she could never have guessed what it would eventually mean.

Quickly, here is the rest of the story:

Ruth followed Naomi back to her people in a little town called Bethlehem. She was an immigrant in the Promised Land. She and Naomi gleaned fields to make ends meet. And then she met and married a man from Bethlehem named Boaz. They had a son named Obed, who married and had a son named Jesse, who married and had son named David, which made Ruth the great-grandmother of the king.

And then, fourteen generations later, another king was born.

This one in a manger on the outskirts of Ruth's adopted hometown of Bethlehem.

To woman named Mary, whose fiancé decided to make the right choice instead of the sensible one – who stuck her side and helped raise that boy into a man who gave his life in the pursuit of joy.

Not happiness.

But joy.

There's no way Ruth could have known what God would do with her choice.

And there's no way we can know what God will do with our choices, either...

