

Sermon: "Devotion"
10/31/2021
Reverend Lisa Eleck

Ruth 1: 1-18

1 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. 2 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. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 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, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 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. 7 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. 8 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. 9 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. 10 They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." 11 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? 12 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, 13 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." 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15 So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 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. 17 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!"

18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Sermon: Devotion

In his book, Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on Christian Life,” Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest, theologian, and author wrote “When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

Being present to one who is struggling, in pain, in despair or grief; that’s what a true friend does. Whatever the situation, a true friend offers their presence. Now that person may be someone we call a friend, but they may also be a relative or a colleague. The key is not the relationship but that the person is present and listens and offers their compassion and not their advice. And we know that we can turn to that person in our time of need.

I don’t know that Herni Nouwen had the story of Ruth in mind when he wrote these words. But they certainly apply to Ruth; and the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Naomi has had a rough life. There was famine in Bethlehem, so her husband brought the family to another country, Moab. We need to remember that doing such a thing would be like a Jewish family moving into a Palestinian neighborhood or to Saudi Arabia or another Arab country. That family might live there, but the history, the culture, and some old hostilities would make really belonging a challenge.

Anyway, Naomi and her husband have 2 sons, who marry local women. We would call them mixed marriages. Then, Naomi’s husband dies, leaving her a widow. And we know that there was no safety net, no husband’s social security 500 to 1000 years before Jesus – the likely time for this story. So Naomi would have had to rely on her sons to care for her.

Ten years later, Naomi’s two sons die. Now Naomi is not only a widow but she has lost both her sons, her only other relatives in Moab. I cannot imagine the depth of the loss that she has experienced. To lose a husband and both sons would be an unthinkable loss. To lose a husband is one thing but two sons, that’s not how things usually go in life. Parents do not expect their children to die before they do. And with the death of her sons, Naomi has also lost her source of financial support and whatever expectations she might have had for her future. On top of it all, she is still a stranger in a foreign land, but now without the men who had been her emotional and financial support.

In her grief and loss, Naomi felt she needed to return to Bethlehem. She wanted to go home. In her grief, she wanted to be with people of her nationality and her Jewish faith.

But she also loved Ruth and Orpah. Naomi was concerned that Ruth and Orpah would feel isolated in Bethlehem if they went with her. They were still young even though they were widows. Naomi felt that they might have a better chance of finding a future husband in Moab.

And the people in Judah might not be so accepting with these Gentile women. If Naomi returned with her daughters in law, she would be bringing Moab women, foreigners, back with her. There might have been prejudice and distrust. Naomi may have even been concerned that she herself, might have encountered prejudice because her sons had married enemies of the Jews. It could have been a difficult situation for the three women.

Naomi encouraged Orpah and Ruth to stay in Moab, with their people, with their families. Even though it would not have been easy for Naomi to make such a journey alone, she cared about her daughters in law. She wanted them to have hopeful futures - to feel at home, to be accepted, and to possibly find a new husband. She told them, "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." Naomi wanted what was best for Orpah and Ruth.

As you know, Ruth insisted on going with Naomi. Her words are heartfelt and touching.

"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!"

Ruth was a young woman whose husband had died. She was a young widow who would accompany an old widow to a different country. It would be a strange land, where she would likely not be accepted. She planned to live there with her mother in law until Naomi died. And on top of that, Ruth told Naomi that she had accepted her Jewish faith. Ruth was willing to convert, leaving her faith behind her with her family and friends in Moab.

It's a story of remarkable devotion. Two women who had both suffered the loss of their husbands, who had shared their grief, were now setting out into an unknown future. Naomi had expectations of being welcomed back home. But Ruth could not be sure what was in store for her. She knew there was risk, but was going to go with Naomi. She loved and trusted Naomi. Ruth was also willing to trust in Naomi's God; even if Naomi died and she was left in Bethlehem alone. What faithfulness to Naomi and to God! What devotion Ruth had for her mother-in-law! What a blessing! What love!

We are touched by the story of Naomi and Ruth. We are touched by stories of devotion. They make our hearts happy. They remind us of the goodness of people and the power of love. Perhaps we even know stories of devotion personally.

Devotion shows in many ways. Devotion is present in the life long attention of a parent to a child who grows into an adult and the devotion continues – with that child or even that child’s child. We see devotion when a child cares for a parent with a chronic or terminal illness and accepts all the challenges that entails. We see devotion in the relationship of a married couple who have weathered many storms across the years. Devotion is evident in a friendship when the two friends can call upon each other no matter the time of day, knowing that there is always someone with whom they could be honest, share their story and be their true self. The love and faithfulness to our beloved person lives on.

On this Sunday of Remembrance, we recall people we love that have died. We recall those whom we trusted, those who were faithful to us, and those to whom we were faithful. We remember family and friends. We recall devotion.

We, as Christians, believe that our beloved are with our God who loves us and them, in life and in death. As we gather on this remembrance Sunday, we recall the people whom we love that have died. We believe that our loved ones are with our God, just as our God is with us – for our God is God of the living and the dead. We recall Jesus’ life and how he cried over the death of his friend, Lazarus. We recall the death and resurrection of our Lord and his promises that he still lives. And we believe we share in the resurrection - that eye has not seen, nor ear heard nor mind imagined what God has in store for those who love him.

Our God loves us, is devoted to us and is there for us. Our God feels our sadness and weeps with us when we are sad or in pain. Our God feels our joy as we recall those memories that make us smile and smiles with us. Our God hears it all in love. Our God also hears our hope. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus offers us resurrection. Jesus offers us hope. Jesus offers us hope of life in a new way with God, one that is beyond our imagination – a life that our loved ones share now and that we can look forward to when we die.

This Remembrance Sunday, we heard the story of Ruth and Naomi, a story of devotion and love. We reflect on the love and devotion we shared, with gratitude for their lives. So we give thanks for the ones we have loved and the love for them that lives on in us. In faith, we trust that our loving God understands our feelings, hears our prayers, offers us hope, and loves us and our beloved, now and always.

