

Songs of Empathy and Commitment

Ruth 1:15-18

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

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Today as we continue to explore the God we sing, we have paired the story of Ruth and Naomi with the beloved song "Sister, Let Me Be Your Servant."

This story, which comes from one of only two books in the 66 books of the Bible that is named after a woman, is a story of empathy and commitment.

The book of Ruth tells the story of one family. It begins with Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, who along with their two sons leave their home in Bethlehem in the midst of a famine. They settle in Moab, a place that Israelites would have seen as enemy territory, and work to build their lives there.

As is true of life in general, their time in Moab entails both joy and sorrow. They escape famine, and eventually their sons find wives - both signs of life. But Moab also becomes a place of death as not only Elimelech, but also later both of their sons, die there.

As our reading entered their story today, Naomi has decided to leave Moab and to return home. As a widow without a living husband or sons, she knows that she will be dependent upon the community to support her. And having heard that the famine was over in Bethlehem she decides it is better to return to her people and to set her daughters-in-law free to return to theirs with the hopes that they will again be married.

One daughter-in-law, Orpah, while first intending to stay with Naomi, relents and agrees to return to her family. She sees the logic in this decision. Not only does it give her the best chance for a future but removes her as a burden to Naomi.

Ruth, however, resists. And the words that Bob read for us today are the words we hear from her. While she, too, surely knows the logic behind returning to her family of origin, instead she pledges herself to Naomi and commits to be the least amount of a burden as she possibly can.

Where you go, I will go...where you stay, I will stay...your people will be my people and your God my own...even where you are buried there I will be as well. These are the sentiments of Ruth.

And honestly, we have gotten so used to hearing these words, especially in wedding ceremonies, that we forget their original context and forget to be surprised by them. While they are lovely for weddings and certainly translate to that occasion, it is good to remember that they were originally words shared between two women who had every reason to go their separate ways.

After all, they came not only from different lands and people, but from enemy lands and people.

While they had been connected through their common love for Naomi's son who was Ruth's husband, with his death they were no longer necessarily tethered to each other. And if mother-in-law jokes tell us anything it is that too often mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are happy to be rid of each other.

Ruth and Naomi were also both widows. And while that meant they could empathize with each other, in their time and place it also meant that having the other would in many ways prove more a burden than a help.

And yet, they committed to each other and they became each other's family.

And to make this story even richer, scholars tell us that it was told and retold in a much later time in the history of Israel, a time when, having returned from exile, the leaders were encouraging people to get rid of their foreign spouses and the children born of those unions, and to purify themselves in relationships only with other Israelites.

And so, it was into this atmosphere of division, a time when leaders were building walls instead of bridges, the story of Ruth came as a reminder that not only had Israelites intermarried before but that it had happened in the lineage of the beloved King David and that Ruth was an example of the depth and beauty of the commitment that can be real even between seemingly opposing people.

And in the words of our hymn we hear an affirmation of the commitment between Ruth and Naomi. The song begins, "Sister, let me be your servant" and later says, "pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant too" - this reminds us of the mutual caretaking that was shared between Ruth and Naomi.

In verse two we sing, "We are pilgrims on a journey..." - we sing those words as we watch Naomi and Ruth set off into a risky future together.

Verse three says, "I will weep when you are weeping, when you laugh I'll laugh with you..." - and is reminiscent of what we heard in Ruth's speech - your people and land and god and your very life will become mine.

And in the fourth verse we sing, "We shall find such harmony, born of all we've known together of great love and agony" - and we are reminded that Ruth and Naomi shared both.

But, friends, we sing these words not only as a reminder of stories of old, but as a challenge to live these values in our lives.

As we sing these words we commit ourselves to stand with each other - not only the others who are like but even, and maybe especially, the others who are not like us, the others from whom our societal or cultural or national norms have divided us.

As we sing these words we commit ourselves to come to know one another's stories - to listen not to critique but to learn and to come to know others in such a way that we can feel what it is like to live their lives, in such a way that we are willing to choose to go with them.

As we sing these words we commit ourselves to build bridges across our differences and to discover our common humanity amidst the joys and agonies of life.

We often miss the surprise in the story of Ruth and Naomi. We act as if this was a natural choice. But the choice that they made to depend on one another, to empathize deeply enough to become not only part of each other's lives but for a time to really become life for each other...the choice they made to risk life together even across so many realities that could easily separate them...this should surprise us, and this should challenge us. It should challenge us to be ready to find community even where we might not expect it.

And, let us also never forget that the commitment Ruth and Naomi shared wasn't theirs alone, but it was rooted in the love of God, our God, whose love is broader than we can imagine and who calls ours to be as well. Amen.