

Called To Be Together  
Ruth 1  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
August 22, 2021  
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

On the StoryPeople calendar that hangs in my office, this month's picture is accompanied by the following words: I said, I don't know how to do this, and you offered me a hand, and suddenly we were in the boat together.

People matter in our lives. Connections matter.

Whether it is a friend who has graced the photos of your life since childhood, showing up for all the celebrations and sorrows...whether it is a person with whom you shared little history but connected in the face of tragedy...whether it is that neighbor or co-worker you really hardly know, but upon whom you trust you could call if help was needed.

I suspect all of us have stories of times when our lives were made better because of other people.

Today's story from scripture is certainly one of those. Here we have Naomi and Ruth...two women who chose each other, who supported each other through hard times, who envisioned a future where they each took care of the other. It is a beautiful story.

*And* sometimes it is a story that we are too willing to romanticize, to accept, to forget to face the challenges it holds. So, we remember the story.

Naomi, the older of the two women, had experienced hardship even before meeting Ruth. She and her family, a spouse and two children, made the choice to move to a new land, to leave their home, in the face of famine.

And when we hear this story we often miss how challenging that choice was. Yes, we know any decision to move to a new place has challenges, but, what those who originally heard the story would have known but what we don't necessarily realize, is that Moab - the land to which they moved - was no place that any self-respecting Israelite would have gone. The Moabites were a people they would not choose to mix with.

And yet, Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, made the hard choice. Maybe they made the choice because of the rumbling in their stomachs. Maybe they made the choice because they saw their sons slipping away in a land of famine. Maybe they made the choice because they would do anything, even make this dreaded move and inevitably hear the criticism of their community, in order to save their children.

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And so they went.

They went to Moab and the evidence seems to indicate that it wasn't as bad as they envisioned...at least at first. Seemingly they had food. Seemingly they got to know their neighbors. We are told the boys, now of marrying age, found partners with whom to share their lives.

But, it seems, tragedy was never too far away in this story. Just when Naomi may have felt safe letting the tension out of her shoulders...just when she may have quit waiting for the other shoe to drop...death visited their household. Before she knew it, her husband and both of her sons had died.

And she found herself sitting across the table from two daughters-in-law, both Moabite women.

Not only was she away from her family, the people who would under other circumstances have cared for her. But she was living in a time and place where a woman's identity was deeply tied to the men in her life. Now, not only was she a stranger in a strange land, but she was a woman without a father, husband or sons. She was an Israelite with two Moabite women to call family.

It's no wonder the anxiety around her is palpable. It's no wonder she feels so discouraged. And it's important that we remember that her attempt to send these two young women away was, even in the face of her own grief, a gift of great love for them. It was also the most reasonable response.

So we should not be surprised when Orpah does just what Naomi asks...returns to her family. She was not abandoning her mother-in-law but rather making life easier, reducing the burden on her.

What should really surprise us is the choice Ruth makes. Rather than returning to her family of origin, Ruth binds herself to Naomi with the commitment of her identity, her faith, her very life. Ruth chooses Naomi, even in the face of the different but very real challenges that choice will bring about.

And so, these two women, who had learned to count on each other, who shared experiences of grief with each other, took the risk to step out of the cocoon of safety in which they lived and to return to Naomi's homeland without knowing how they would be received or if a better life was waiting there. They went out, counting on each other, into a world that expected them to be enemies. They went, knowing they were called to be together, to create community with each other.

But we must never read this story and pretend that such a commitment is easy. Whenever we build real relationships of trust, whenever we build community rooted in true commitment and care, it is not easy.

And meanwhile, it is a reality into which we are called.

We hear that in Ruth and Naomi's story as two people from different backgrounds build a family and life together.

We hear that in the stories of Jesus as he calls a rag tag group of followers and invites them into his work of love.

We hear that in the early church as people set aside otherwise defining factors about their identity to be one together in the body of Christ.

Having recently been at camp and having heard from Quinn today, I can't help but think of the experience of going to church camp. I remember this from when I was a teenager and I observe it now with others: camp is known as a place where community is built across borders and boundaries that otherwise might divide. At camp the delineation between the groups that would be so clear in a high school cafeteria all but disappears. At camp kids who might never feel quite free to be themselves at home find a safe place. And at camp the question almost always arises: how do we carry this sense of community back into our hometowns, our schools, our "real" lives?

It's not only a question for teenagers, but an important question for us to be asking ourselves throughout our lives...an important question for us as a community of faith.

How do we create communities of safety and care for all people?

How do we nurture authentic connections that value the stories of other people's lives?

How do we, even in the face of all the challenges, choose to care for one another?

There are no easy answers to these questions. And building community, in the best sense of the word, is a lifelong journey. It is something we will always be working on and something we are called to continue to work on.

I read this sentence the other day: *Authentic connection - even when it's messy and awkward - has the power to bring us together and carry us through.*

Friends, we live in a messy world. We live in the midst of so much that feels overwhelming. Perhaps more than ever before, a sense of connection and community matters...it helps carry us through.

As children of God, as followers of Jesus, this is our calling...to create such communities, to be the ones who extend a hand so that no one is left alone.

May it be so