

Little, but Fierce

Preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on May 8, 2022

Friendship Presbyterian Church

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 one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or 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 had consideration for 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.

(Ruth 1:1-18, NRSV)

You know this isn't the first time we've read – as a Sunday morning scripture text – a common wedding ceremony reading. This has happened before in the super-familiar I Corinthians 13, the famous "Love" chapter. But today, we reach into the far more obscure recesses of the Old Testament and there pull from the book of Ruth the *one* short portion you might well have heard before:

*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.*

Lisa's better about remembering this sort of thing than I am, but we *may* have used this text in our *own* wedding, almost 16 years ago! It certainly speaks profoundly to deep commitment.

But as you may have noticed already, the original context of these words is anything but a wedding. It's the words of a young widow, Ruth, to her mother-in-law Naomi, herself a widow and now without living sons either. The *book* of Ruth, as a whole, is only four chapters long, nestled comfortably between the books of Judges and I Samuel, and narrating a time after the post-Exodus settlement in the Promised Land, but before the rise of the monarchy, with Kings Saul, David, and Solomon.

The text I read sets up the story, with Ruth, a young Moabite woman who marries into a Jewish family from Bethlehem as they sojourn in Moab to escape a severe famine. Moab was for Israel an *enemy* nation – the animosities were ancient – and so their desperation must have been great. And then Elimelech, the family patriarch, unexpectedly dies, prompting the sons to do something they certainly never expected to do. Their taking *Moabite wives* is a testimony to their grave uncertainty as to when, or even *if*, they would ever be able to return home.

But just as they all seem to be making the best of a tough situation, the bottom falls out: The two sons themselves die, leaving their mother Naomi and their two wives to fend for themselves. It may go without saying that in an ancient patriarchal culture, to be an older widow with no sons, and no marriage prospects herself, is to have no obvious means of support. And the truth is, in her grief, she was ready to give up and die, and she saw no reason in the world for her still young Moabite daughters-in-law to hitch their wagons to hers and return with her to Judah, where they, as unwelcome members of a hated enemy people, would surely be viewed with suspicion and prejudice.

And so, she pleads with them to forget about her and to return to their own people and re-marry and have babies and live long lives. But neither wants to. They both want to stay with her, but one of them, Orpah, is tearfully persuaded eventually to follow her brain and do the sensible thing and leave. But Ruth, we are told, "clung" to Naomi. Ruth won't let go:

*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!”*

She wasn't leaving, and Naomi had nothing more to say.

Their arrival in Bethlehem is noticed by everyone and creates a stir – partly because Naomi had been gone so long, and partly because of who has *not* returned, but also partly because of who is tagging along. Thereafter, for the rest of the story, she is “Ruth the Moabite,” whereby her *foreignness*, her *otherness*, is an essential part of the story. And it's now that we see the full expression of Naomi's grief, in which she expresses her belief that her losses were by the hand of God himself and that for all intents and purposes her life is over, and all hope of her family's name living on is gone.

All hope indeed seems to be lost, but Ruth still remains with Naomi, and determined to survive and for Naomi to survive, she ventures out into the barley fields to pick up what she could behind the reapers. Understand what this means: She is not one of the proper paid workers but literally picking up what is left behind, and as a *stranger* ... as an unaccompanied young woman of a hated race ... she risks being run off or even much worse.

But one day she happens to find herself in a field owned by a rich man named Boaz who it turns out knows of Naomi, and when he unexpectedly shows kindness to Ruth, and she asks why, he explains why:

All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge! (Ruth 2:11-12, NRSV)

Later, when Naomi asks Ruth how her day went, Ruth tells her, and tells her about Boaz. And it's enough to bring even Naomi back to life, who exclaims with joy, “Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead! ... The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin.” (2:20)

The rest of the book is the delightful story of how Ruth, in cahoots with a newly-revived Naomi, manages to win the love of Boaz and have him act as the “redeemer” of his deceased kinsman Elimelech's family, such that through his children with Ruth, the names of *Elimelech* and *Naomi* and *Mahlon* would live on and endure – “that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place.” (4:10)

And so, not long after, when Ruth does bear a son, the women of Bethlehem – who had looked on Naomi with pity before – now say to her,

Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! [This child] shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him. (4:14-15)

Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her lap, and she became his nurse. The women of the neighborhood gave him a name – Obed; and in the years to come, Obed would become the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David. (4:16-17)

And now you know the rest of the story!

One of my favorite lines in all of Shakespeare is one taken from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – one I shared with many of you mid-week in our church newsletter: “Though she but little, she is fierce.”

Though she be but little, she is fierce. I ruminate on those words, and I think of any number of strong women I have known in my life, who have risen above circumstances that would hold them back, above any “littleness” in the eyes of their world, to make a difference. I think of my Lisa. I think of Lisa’s mother, and my mother and my sister. I think of my grandmothers.

And as I give thanks for them all, I am drawn back again to the character of Ruth. I think of Ruth’s steadfast, unshakeable love for Naomi ... her determination to do what she must to provide for her adopted family ... her courage in the face of bitter prejudice ... all save the day, and give her new family their life back, their *names* back, and in so doing, change the course of history.

What better story to lift up and celebrate on this Mothers’ Day, as we celebrate our mothers and mother-figures who have blessed our lives and sacrificed, so that our families and communities could survive and thrive. We thank God for them all and rightly see in their steadfast commitment a profound model of the steadfast, unchangeable love of God.

To the glory of God! Amen.