



**SOUTHWESTERN
PENNSYLVANIA
SYNOD** EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN
CHURCH IN AMERICA

SUMMER SERMON SERIES

SERVICE 2 of 3 | **RUTH: THE LOVING LEADER**

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Pastor Peter Asplin
Assistant to the Bishop

It's hard for me, as a white man of Scandinavian heritage, well-educated, with a solid income, married to a white university professor to understand what life must have been like for Ruth.

She was married off by her father to a foreign man, a native of their hereditary enemies, who had only lived in the country for a few years. She had no choice. But she did have a choice when Naomi resolved to return alone to Israel. Ruth could have stayed in Moab in the culture and among the people she knew. But she chose otherwise. She chose to care for someone who was alone in the world, chose to stay – and go, with Naomi to a country where she would be surrounded by people who had been taught for example by the Prophet Zephania, that “Moab shall become like Sodom ... a waste forever. The remnant of my people shall plunder them. (Zep 2:9 NRSV)

But despite what must have been terrible fear, despite what must have been terrible prejudice, Ruth chooses to go where Naomi goes, and to make Naomi's

people her people. And she chooses this out of love for Naomi, and a sense of kindred suffering. Both of them widows, both of them mourning, both of them bereft of family.

I think one of the reasons I love this text is the honesty of it. Naomi returns to Bethlehem, to the land and people of her youth and people remember her! They know who she is and welcome her. But despite their welcome, despite her return to a people and land she knows, despite the love of Ruth and Ruth's commitment to stay with her, Naomi's loss permeates her view of life, permeates her understanding of who she is – and who God is.

The story of Naomi is a story that rings true to those whose lose their spouses, to cancer or covid, to war or to racial violence. The story of Naomi is a story that rings true to those whose children die of suicide or drug overdoses, in war or in peace.

When faced with the loss of love and hope and safety and security sometimes all we have left is weeping. Sometimes, with Naomi, we see that the whole of our lives is loss: And so we understand “Call me ‘Bitter’ because the Lord has dealt bitterly with me.” (Ruth 1:20 NRSV)

In the last six months people who have lost loved ones to the pandemic have reason to be “Bitter.” In the last six months people who have lost their jobs have reason to be “Bitter.” In the last four hundred years people who have lost their humanity because it was denied to them based on their skin color, or their national origin, or their religion, or their native language, have a reason to be “Bitter.”

And what was Ruth's response to Naomi, both when she wanted to go home, alone, and when she voiced her bitterness, her fear, and her abandonment and her anger: Her response was to stay, and to care and to listen. Not to lecture, or criticize, or explain away the pain Naomi was in. Ruth's said “Let me go to the fields and glean.” Let me go find food for you and for me, find food by gathering food left after the harvest has been completed, after the professionals have completed their work. She literally follows the workers and picks up with they leave behind.

And notice that this is dangerous for her. Because even 2500 or 2700 years ago, being poor is dangerous. Ruth knows she can't just gather in any field, but in someone who "finds favor on her," even a poor Moabite woman. Both Boaz and Naomi say to her "stay in this field" because in other fields "the young men might abuse you."

So Ruth, knowing her mother-in-law, who she loves, is mired in bitterness and despair, endangers herself out of love for her, to feed them both. And someone takes pity on them both and provides not just food but security.

Endangering herself out of love for someone in need is a theme that makes some sense to me in 2020. My parents live in the suburbs of Baltimore and are in the 70s. They have strictly quarantined themselves during Covid-19. My sister has a four-year-old and lives in the zip code in the city of Baltimore with the highest incidence of Covid-19 in the state. And so my sister also has strictly quarantined. But, she leaves the house and shops and takes groceries (and take-out) once a week to my parents throughout this time of Pandemic. She's frustrated and angry about the pandemic, like we all are. She's scared of getting my parents or her family sick. But she risks going forth out of love for her husband and son and parents.

She cares for them by risking herself.

It's a story that makes sense to us Christians.

But it's also a story that makes sense to folks in the African-American community. From slaves who helped others escape slavery, risking their lives for the sake of others, to slaves who stood up for themselves, like George Washington's slaves Hercules Posey and Ona Judge who abandoned their enslavement while Washington was president in Philadelphia. It makes sense to African-Americans like Mamie Till who stood for justice after the murder of her son Emmet, and for those who work and advocate for black lives from the 1860s and 1920s when speaking up for African Americans often meant death at the hands of the mob, until today, when it can mean arrest and abuse and hospitalization and sometimes death.

But whether we're talking about people working for racial and social justice today, or talking about those risking their lives to care for quarantined parents, or in hospitals and nursing homes and doctors offices, we recognize that serving those who are suffering – even when they aren't nice, even when they are despairing and angry, is the story of Ruth, and it's the story of faith.

Ruth is a Biblical story, and in none of its 2500 words do we hear the Word of God pronounced. God doesn't speak to Ruth, God Doesn't speak to Naomi. God doesn't speak to Boaz or Elimilech.

But the people of God, from the ancient Hebrews to Christians and Jews around the world today, recognize in the story of Ruth and Naomi a testament to living in terrible times, a testament to love in terrible times. Like the love of Mamie Till for her son and for Black people throughout the nation. Like the love of doctors and nurses for even the crotchiest and most recalcitrant patients, like the love of children keeping their parents safe in the pandemic, like the love of protestors risking their physical safety to call attention to injustice.

Ruth is recognized, as a scripture text and as a narrative, for 2500 years, as a story that teaches us what loving God and loving others looks like. And for that we can all be grateful.

Amen.