

Still Neighborly After All These Years
A Sermon for Pilgrim Church
November 10, 2024
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

Scripture Readings 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^[a] and Chilion;^[b] 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 goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

15 So she said, "Look, 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,
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,
and there will I be buried.
May the LORD do thus 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.

Mark 12:28-34

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” **29** Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; **30** you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ **31** The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” **32** Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; **33** and ‘to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” **34** When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

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It was a long walk that Elimelech and Naomi and their sons took, from Bethlehem to Moab. Seven to ten days on foot, and there was a famine in Bethlehem, so they were

hungry when they set forth to walk seven to ten days, north, across the Jordan river, through mountains, east, still walking, then walking south, with the sea to their right, and on, well into what we call Jordan today. They were so hungry they walked into Moab, into a strange place where their ancestors had not been met with kindness.¹ 75 or 100 miles they sojourned, this hungry family of four.

They arrived in Moab and the hardships continued. The text recounts that

“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 [Naomi] was left without her two sons and her husband.”

Naomi met hospitality in Moab but also tragedy. Her family survived famine only for her to lose her family. She made a new home - and lost it. And she was gone for so long from Bethlehem that when she returned she could not know if she would be received as kin or as Moabite. Naomi, it says a few verses later, became Mara - *bitter*. After all that had happened, it made sense for Naomi to be bitter, afraid, and wondering if she was alone for her long walk back to Bethlehem.

But Naomi was not abandoned. Ruth stayed with her. Ruth and Naomi walked back, that hundred mile journey, day after day on foot and in tears, Ruth said, where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. You will not walk alone. Ruth, the Moabite walked with Naomi on the long road to Bethlehem.

Now there’s something we need to know about Moab. This week I learned some things I hadn’t gleaned before about Ruth & the Moab context, in a book by Padraig O’Tuama and Glenn Jordan, two Irish and Northern Irish theologians. Moab - picture this in your mind - Moab was one of the places the Hebrews crossed through on their own long Exodus walk. But, tradition says, the Moabites were unkind to the Hebrews. So, there were rules - see Deuteronomy 23² - against contact with the Moabites. Think of the Moabites the way we’ve come to understand “the Samaritans” of the Gospels.

¹ *Borders and Belonging: The Book of Ruth, A Story For Our Times*. Padraig O’Tuama and Glenn Jordan. London: Canterbury Press, 2021.

² “No Ammonite or Moabite shall come into the assembly of the LORD even to the tenth generation. None of their descendants shall come into the assembly of the LORD forever?”

And Ruth, most times she's named in this book, she's called Ruth the Moabite - Ruth who was also a widow, hungry, displaced - basically one of the most vulnerable people you can imagine - Ruth looks at Naomi and says: I'm going with you. You will not walk alone.

Ruth's story is placed in the time of the Judges - but later in the book we hear about David, and scholars think this story was written down years after David, after the Babylonian exile, and that's important as we think about who heard this tale.

There are two parts of the Biblical story that wrestle with each other in Ruth. Yes, there are places where the Biblical story wrestles with itself.

Within the book of Deuteronomy, this happens:

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (10:19)

But Deuteronomy also says, No Moabites!

Padraig O'Tuama and Glenn Jordan have an idea of why this story was told after the exile, and it has to do with the rhetoric found in the post-exilic prophet Nehemiah. The people were rebuilding - Jerusalem, the temple, the ways of the people. And speaking to how to be, post-exile, Nehemiah ripped into foreigners, specifically Moabites, with particular vitriol for anyone in Israel in a mixed marriage. I mean, if you think language about foreigners in 2024 is rough, Nehemiah 13 should have a trigger warning.

O'Tuama and Jordan note how long held animosities tend to repeat themselves again and again until something changes the people's hearts.

"There are occasions in history when the proper response to the times is not another war, or new legislation, not even an election, but a work of art...an attempt to divert the hearts of people toward some lasting values, and to remind them of their better selves."³

They go on to say, "...Nehemiah gives some indication of the foment in Jerusalem and society in general as it came to terms with the impacts of conquest, exile and return. When fear and anxiety govern a community's actions...there is often a scapegoat created to carry away the community's greatest anxieties. That scapegoat is frequently the stranger."⁴

³ Borders and Belonging, page. 47

⁴ P. 53

Ruth was a migrant, a foreigner, a widow from a mixed marriage, a Moabite. And she was one of the bravest, most compassionate women in all the Bible. And her story was told in a moment when it could remind faithful people that God called them to love their neighbors and care for the stranger.

Ruth was an antidote to enmity and division. A story told to help build up kindness. A story that defied stereotypes and put the lie to scapegoating. "Ruth is the matriarch for people who are firsts."⁵

And the layers of the story continue. For Padraig O'Tuama and Glenn Jordan wrote their commentary for Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland, and the United Kingdom between 2019 and 2021, in the wake of Brexit. They told Ruth's story in their moment and with their neighbors, as an antidote to conflict, division, xenophobia. To tell Ruth's story post-Brexit was to show an example of surprising compassion and neighborliness in a conflicted and difficult time.

So here we are. November 10, 2024. The US, after a very difficult election season.

I don't know who in this room voted which way on Ballot Question 4, or for State Rep, or for President. I think we've got some differences in how we voted and whether Wednesday was a day of frustration or relief.

Some of us in this room and many people in our community have been deeply upset and anxious since Wednesday. If you're not anxious or upset, let me gently invite you to listen with compassion to those who are. There are folks who genuinely fear for their health, their marriages, for their ability to live in the US, and more.

Reading Ruth again this week, I figure she must be in the list of ancestors of David in the Hebrew Bible, and in the Christian Bible, in the list of ancestors of Jesus, for a reason. There's a message in the story of the foremother of Jesus, who preached, love your neighbors, *love all of your neighbors*. So to compassion and love, to neighbors and neighborliness I return.

No election changes the commitments of our faith, the way we proclaim it here at Pilgrim Church, commitments to neighborliness, commitments to loving our neighbors (all of them), to radical inclusion, to welcoming the sojourner, and to speaking up for those in need and protecting the vulnerable.

⁵ P. 39

I think all of us - no matter which candidate we voted for - will need to live into our faith commitments and step up to see and care for and walk with our neighbors in powerful ways, in brave and bold and concrete ways that are harder than what we've been asked to do recently. I'm talking about the Haitian and Venezuelan sojourners who have walked and walked and walked in hunger, seeking safety and now live right here in Lexington and are our neighbors and wonder if they're going to be deported. The trans teens who hunger for someone to call them by their name and now wonder if they have to hide. The women who hunger for safety in their bodies.

There are folks walking rocky, difficult, dusty roads that got a lot harder this week. Last month in Alabama I heard stories of the 1965 voting rights march. A long, difficult, march toward freedom with many setbacks along the way - and the gift of determined and committed people walking alongside each other.

If you, hearing this, find that you are Naomi - worn down, grieving and afraid, oh, please hear me: you are not alone.

Ancient stories unfold with new meaning in every era. This week, I heard Ruth's story as an invitation to commitment. An invitation to promise our neighbors: Where you go, I will go. You will not walk alone.

Amen.