

## Sermon – “Unexpected Endings”

Scripture: Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17, Mark 12:38-44

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Most of us are familiar with the pledge of loyalty from the Book of Ruth which is sometimes quoted at weddings. *“Entreat me not to leave you or to return 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.”* These words were first spoken by Ruth to Naomi as an oath of solidarity. Years earlier, Naomi, her husband and two sons left Bethlehem during a famine to live in Moab, where Naomi’s son married Ruth. When both men die unexpectedly, these two widows are destitute. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem and asks Ruth to return to her Moabite family because she has no security to offer her and Ruth would not be welcome in Bethlehem as a foreigner. Ruth chooses to return with Naomi. She risks her life and her future to stand with the mother-in-law she loved, who would otherwise be alone in the world.

In our first scripture reading, Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17, we find ourselves privy to a pivotal conversation between these two widows in antiquity; and the marriage and son that grow out of their plans and intentionality. Because widows had no livelihood in this patriarchal culture, the book of Leviticus created a law that the nearest male relative of the deceased marry the widow and provide her a future. This is the law Naomi is appealing to when she encourages Ruth to visit Boaz at the threshing floor. Earlier in the story, we see another ancient law working to protect the poor in the community. Extra grain at the time of harvest was to be left behind for the alien or foreigner, the orphan and the widow. Ruth gleanes the wheat from the fields of Boaz who is a distant kinsman on Naomi’s late husband’s side. May God open our hearts and minds to the hearing and understanding of God’s word.

**1** Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, *“My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. 2 Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. 3 Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” 5 She said to her, “All that you tell me I will do.”*

**13** So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. **14** Then the women said to Naomi, *“Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 He 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.” 16 Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 17 The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.*

Jesus introduces us to another widow in our second scripture reading, Mark 12:38-44. She arrives at the temple giving her last two coins following Jesus’ criticism of the religious leaders who exploit the poor, in particular widows. One wonders if the role of the poor widow in this reading is to provide a model for giving or to provide a tragic example of how religious institutions fall short in the care of the most vulnerable among us? In this final public scene of Jesus’ ministry, the widow offers a glimpse into what Jesus is about to do. Jesus is on his way to Golgotha where he will give “the whole of his life.” Jesus calls the church to whole-hearted, self-giving that transcends dollars and cents. Hear now God’s holy word.

38 As Jesus taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, 39 and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! 40 They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation." 41 He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. 42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. 43 Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. 44 For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

The title of the sermon: Unexpected Endings

The text: "Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you.'" Ruth 3:1

Let us pray: Holy God of loving kindness, thank you for seeking security for each of us and for the advocates along the way who share their experience and who give us the courage to take the necessary risks. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Last Sunday afternoon I was invited to be a part of a panel following the presentation of "The Rising Up of the Springdale Ladies Aid Society," a play skillfully written by our own Carole Kennerly. The opening scene is a grandmother sharing her grandmother's story with her granddaughter. It is an account of generations of courageous women seeking equality for their daughters and granddaughters and the risks they took in the struggle to secure a woman's right to vote.

I was honored to be a part of the panel led by Dr. Naomi Lynn, the first Chancellor of the University of Illinois at Springfield. Naomi shared a quote by Thomas Jefferson in the discussion as she affirmed the role of her husband, Dr. Robert Lynn, on their academic and professional journeys and other male mentors along the way who encouraged and welcomed her leadership. She said: *Men of quality are not threatened by women of equality.*

As I was reading today's scripture I couldn't help but wonder if the biblical Naomi sensed that Boaz was a man of quality when she sent her daughter-in-law to lay at his feet on the threshing floor. Make no mistake, my brothers and sisters, this was a bold and risky move which could have ended badly. Without getting into the details or the politics of sexuality in ancient Israel, Ruth was making it very clear to Boaz that she was interested in becoming his wife.

On one level, the Book of Ruth is a simple story of genealogy with the surprise ending of a foreign woman, a Moabite, becoming the great-great-grandmother of King David and ancestor to the Christ Child in a lineage which emphasized purity of race.

On another level, the Book of Ruth is a story of resilience, loyalty and loving-kindness between two women following the unexpected ending of their husbands' untimely deaths. Together they make a way where there is no way. Naomi knows the system and together they work the system to secure a future. There is risk and respect among all the players in this delightful scenario. They give their all to one another, not unlike the widow in Mark's story who gives her all. Something we are each called to do in the lives we live, in the commitments we make and in the unexpected endings along the way. We are a little further down the road of justice and equality only because of the wisdom and risks of those who have walked before us.

Ruth and Naomi is a newly formed PW circle at Westminster, named in honor of this inter-generational friendship. The book *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life*, by Joan Chittister, begins the chapter on Empowerment with these words:

*The moment a woman becomes conscious of the way her world goes together, she is obligated to say her truth for the sake of all the women yet unborn. Then, because of her, their own lives may be better than hers was... Naomi is a woman who knows how life works, and, powerless as she is in the system, she has great strength of self, great consciousness of her dignity as a daughter of God. She knows herself to have a place in God's order of things. And she passes on to Ruth the kind of consciousness it takes to move the system closer to its own integrity, if only one step at a time.*

Naomi, who left Bethlehem “the house of bread” whole and returned in the middle of the barley harvest broken, is whole again through an unexpected bond with her son’s widow—a Moabite woman whose name, Ruth, means friendship. Some believe the story of Ruth arose among women storytellers who knew and understood the hardships of Naomi and believed the paradox of her life was consistent with faith in God and that her story was worth telling. Some believe the story arose during the post-exilic period (around 500 B.C.E.) to undermine the authority of the priests who were trying to “purify” Israel by ostracizing foreign women. Ruth’s story joins other biblical narratives in affirming that foreigners and strangers belong to God and often reflect God’s kindness more graciously. Whatever the reason for preserving this story of unexpected endings, it is a masterpiece of deep emotional satisfaction and artistic beauty. Who among us cannot identify with Naomi’s sorrow and disappointment...when things turn out differently from what we planned or anticipated! We all experience this paradox in our life choices and commitments.

I have a vivid memory of worshiping at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago the year before I graduated from seminary. I was questioning the commitment I had made to ministry. After leaving the Reformed Church of America and joining the Presbyterian Church, I was being asked to wait another three years before ordination was even a possibility. Dr. Elam Davies preached on Ruth that Sunday. The title of the sermon: Does a commitment story always have a happy ending? His words inspired me to “keep on walking” down the path I chose, a path that has taken me to places I didn’t anticipate, and because of some very wise Naomis along the way, to the home I have found at Westminster as your Pastor and Head of Staff.

I went into the ministry looking for answers to questions and for certainty to sustain me in the uncertainty of life. I discovered that only when I was willing to question the answers of the church and tolerate the uncertainty we are all asked to endure would I begin to experience the peace of Christ. I went into the ministry looking for happiness. I discovered that only when I was willing to enter with people into their struggle and disappointment could I also share with them in their joy, and experience my own.

Ruth was willing to enter into Naomi’s emptiness. Together they found their way back to the house of bread. They found nourishment but not without humiliation and they found a home in Boaz but not without risking their reputation. In a world of casual relationships, we give thanks for this story of risk and commitment. And we give thanks for the One who would be born through Ruth’s lineage in the city of Bethlehem—the house of bread, the One who nourishes us in the breaking of the bread, who enters our emptiness in solidarity and who makes us one with God, with each other and with all who have come before us. Thank God for the tie that binds us, for the One who summons us, for the quality of the men among us and for the women who have given their all before us. By the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we continue the struggle, the journey, one step at a time, to find a greater equality, kindness and justice in all our unexpected endings. Amen.