

## Commitment to Hope

By Ridgley Joyner

Ruth 1:1-18

Two weeks ago, I led a class in Confirmation about Trusting in the Gracious Mercy of God. In it we talked about Abraham and Sarah, Noah, Rahab, Joseph. All these people who faithfully served God with great hope of a future they would not see the fruits of, but they trusted God and committed to the hope of what is to come.

Part of the curriculum asked that I invite a church member who could attest to ways that St. John's and how they have trusted in the gracious mercy of God over time. Betsy Miller joined us.

Betsy shared of when her husband Bob was in the hospital in Russia so far from family and friends, yet the loving touch of church members flooded her email inbox with care and concern. She spoke of ways that financially God provided for our church—when we needed to fix a roof and the sale of a piece of our land was provided the money—when we needed a renovation, and we had discovered someone willed to the church for what we needed. Over the years at St. John's God has provided for us more than we thought would be possible. Trusting in the gracious mercy of God was an easy concept for me to teach our youth because I had so many examples at St. John's.

Our scripture reading this morning for Stewardship Sunday is from our lectionary, which remember is always oddly timely. The Holy Spirit is always speaking to us, especially when we don't plan it to—The book of Ruth points us to what it looks like most to trust in God's mercy—God's *Hesed*, steadfast love in times of great sorrow—in times of struggle.

Like Nancy read this morning, the book of Ruth begins with...not Ruth, but Naomi. And a hard decision. They. Are. Hungry. We are immediately introduced to two people: Naomi and Elimelech, married with two sons in Bethlehem.

Naomi's name means "pleasant" But what the first verse of the book of Ruth shows us is that things are far from pleasant with this Naomi. Naomi and Elimelech are faced with a hard decision. There's no burning bush telling them to deliver God's people, there's no promise of a future of a family when you're at old age to

carry on your lineage, there is no great word from God. Naomi and Elimilech are hungry. Their family is starved and they had to do what was best for survival. And that meant—isolation from their family and friends and all that they had known in Judah. So they went to the highlands of Moab, one of Judah's not so favorite neighboring nations. They leave Bethlehem (translates as the house of bread) in a famine to find food for their family.

Elimilech & Naomi, Israelites, pack up during a famine and move across the border into Moab, and Moabites and Israelites...aren't the best of friends. They are strangers in a foreign land. Despite this big change, they eventually settle. Here their sons meet and marry two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. This Jewish family welcomes them into the fold. We are told they were settled.

It is there, that perhaps they thought they had endured the struggle, made the big decision to leave everything they knew, but still built a life, in a foreign place, it was a good life and they were blessed with daughters-in-law. But this wasn't the only hard thing they'd be faced with--the strife wasn't over.

It is in this "perceived stability" a second wave of struggles come—we learn that there is another famine-- Elimilech dies. As grieved as Naomi is she weathers it—at least she has her sons and daughters-in-law.

But then 10 years later, another blow-- her sons die! And in a patriarchal society where men= security Naomi is left alone, a widow and vulnerable. It just feels like Naomi was hit, hit again, hit some more, just trying to find the most faithful way to get on solid ground, to find stability. Things are changing so quickly, and yet she is still grieving as she weathers it all, and Naomi, whose name means "pleasant" is struggling to see where God is in all of this—if God even is. Naomi is hungering to make sense of all this mess she finds her life to be. Full of grief, hard decisions, not one bit of normal.

Another famine leaves Naomi having to face yet another hard decision in times of struggle. Naomi is hungry. She hears that there is food in Judah. She could go home to her people...would her people even be there? This could be a way that she can provide for her daughters in law, but would they go? Would they be accepted? Moabites were always at odds with the Israelites. Even something as

comforting as returning home is a hard decision. But they must go. They went along the road to Judah where the Lord had provided food for God's people.

And it is there that Naomi looks at her daughters in law—  
“Go back, be with your people,”

Orpah and Ruth persist. No, Naomi we will go with you to your people.

Naomi pleads, what good am I to you? I don't have sons, I couldn't even conceive a son you could marry—there is no future with me. Save yourself. May the Lord give to you all that I don't have—security, prosperity, a husband.” Naomi pleads-- Go. God's hand has come out against me...I am BITTER. The Hebrew word Naomi uses in verses 13 and 19 is mar meaning grieved, pained. Not only frustration but despair, sadness and anger may be a part of her bitterness. It is a complex emotion.

The women weep together and Orpah kisses her and returns home.

But Ruth. Ruth the Moabite, Ruth the foreigner, the outsider, Ruth is persistent in her commitment to Naomi, her commitment to hope in a vulnerable and broken time.

She says-- I'm not abandoning you, so stop trying to get me to.

Where you go, I will go.  
Where you lodge, I will lodge.  
Your people shall be my people.  
Your God shall be my God  
Where you die, I will die.

United Methodist Pastor Dr. John Holbert reflects “She utters one of the Bible's greatest speeches, a speech made famous at weddings, both spoken and sung. But because it has been so used, it threatens to be trivialized, its magnificence blunted in the shadow of wedding vows and cakes and white dresses. We must remember the exact context of this speech if we are to recover its wonder. Ruth has been dismissed by Naomi; she plainly is not in any of Naomi's future. Yet, she says this:”

"Do not force me to abandon you, or to turn away from following you" (1:16).

This poetry is quoted at countless weddings, in songs—because of its beauty, its Commitment through sorrowful times, through Happy times. And what makes it beautiful, is the heartbreaking commitment to someone who isn't even family in a time of great struggle.

Do you know this emotion a little too well? What has left you hungering for God to make sense of things in your life? What big decision are you being faced with?

Does it hit a little close to home, hearing of all the decisions Naomi had to make in the midst of challenging times? Does it hit a little close to home, hearing Naomi say "I am very bitter."

When I read these words, all I can think of is hope. The strong commitment to hope that Ruth has—for Naomi, for their lives. Ruth's commitment to her mother-in-law is striking. That even though struggles endure—even though it feels like one hit after another—even though Naomi finds herself bitter and punished by God. That we will endure it together.

Friends it is no secret that we find ourselves here in 2021 looking back at hard decision after hard decision, trial after trial. Amid grief yet still having to navigate all of the changes in front of us. We thought that virtual school ending would solve everything, we thought that returning to work would solve everything, we thought that if we just recreated 2019, all would be well. We wouldn't feel so vulnerable, bitter, broken. We are tired, we are still stressed, perhaps more than ever.

So on this Stewardship Sunday, how can we even begin to ask ourselves what God is calling us to? We don't know what to expect, we don't know our future, we just don't know. How does discernment happen in an impossible time?

How? Ruth can show us.

Ruth--A story that begins with heartbreak and ends with a commitment to hope. A story that begins in possibility ends in possibility, despite our expectations.

This small moment on the road to Bethlehem where Ruth commits to her Mother in Law leads to a fulfillment of so much prophecy. Ruth, an outsider, a Moabite widow makes a commitment to hope in a hard time and her steadfast love for Naomi leads to the lineage of Jesus.

Look at how God works in blessing the faithfulness of people amid having made tremendous personal sacrifices. I encourage you to read the rest of Ruth—it is only 2 more pages-- Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem, and eventually meet Boaz, who takes Ruth to be his wife, and Ruth bears him a son named Obed (“Meaning servant of God”), and Obed was the father of Jesse and Jesse was the father of David. Ruth became the grandmother of Jesse, and the great-grandmother of David who became the King of Israel. Ruth’s commitment to hope led to an outsider becoming part of the lineage to Jesus. Ruth’s persistent care for Naomi brought about what God was calling into being.

This next week, we are inviting the congregation to discern how we can work as a church family to commit our time, our gifts, and our financial resources. This is never an easy thing to discern in a time of the unknown, but like the great saints our Confirmands studied last month, we may never see the full fruition to what God calls us to, but what we *are* called to is a commitment to hope. To doing the best we can, where we are, hoping that God leads us into a future that is more than we could ever ask for or imagine, just like Ruth and Naomi.

Perhaps one piece of what we are being called to is to trust in the gracious mercy of God Almighty. As we ask ourselves this week “What God is calling us to do” Let us remember what we proclaim in this meal—that God welcomes us all with an abundant feast, with abundant blessings in time of what might feel like great emptiness. God is among us in all the difficult decisions and grief. God has not abandoned us, and God is leading us to leave from this table committing to hope—for the hope of the church universal, for the hope and possibility of our future as St. John’s.

Most of all I pray we might discern how God is calling us to each other, how we can be the light for one another and the community by being our church family. How can we exhibit Ruth’s risk in a vulnerable place, by committing to what God tells us will be, by committing to one another? God has called us all to this place among these people for such a time as this. And we are now in a time when all of

us are struggling. I have been so proud to be a part of this church family when our loved ones are undergoing hard times, but these days there isn't just one family struggling, we all are, and reaching out to one another, being each other's Ruth, is just what is needed.

Now, more than ever, we are unsure what the future is, we have weathered storms, and we likely weather more, and scripture shows that we are in good company.

What we can learn from Ruth is to commit to a hopeful future—a place where God provides, a place where God leads us to not where we thought we'd be.

Time and time again, God provides, even in times of great sorrow, even in unprecedented times, and St. John's story is a living testament to that. All that we have and all that we are comes from and is thanks to the God that meets us at this table with the bread of life, inviting us to commit to hope. To commit to each other, for God's glory and God's great plan for what's next for us in 2022. Thanks be to God.

As you take this bread and drink from this cup, and taste and see that the Lord is Good, you might join Ruth in her commitment to hope.