

UNCOMMON LOVE: THE STORY OF RUTH AND ORPAH
Ruth 1:1-18

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
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This story's first two chapters have plots that originate with economic necessity. The family was from Bethlehem, the city of David, in the region of Judah. But there was a famine in Judah, and so many people fled. Just as in our day, there are people fleeing, trying to find new places for their families. Elimelech fled, along with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. They spent years in Moab. When the two sons came of age, they married women from Moab. Just as in our day, people begin to assimilate within one generation.

Chapter Two is the story of three women left alone. Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a widow. Both of her sons also died, leaving her two daughters-in-law widows also. In a patriarchal society, if you were a woman who was not under the care of a husband or a father, you had no means of survival. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth were nobodies when their husbands died.

Naomi heard that things were better in Judah, that the time of famine was over. She saw a trip home as her only means of survival; there, at least, she would have extended family to watch over her. There, at least, she wouldn't starve. She told her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab, to go back to their home villages, back to their families. Maybe they could find new husbands. At least they would be cared for.

One daughter-in-law, Orpah, did the sensible thing. She said a fond and tearful goodbye to Naomi; then she returned home. But Ruth would not leave Naomi's side.

Her love for her is too strong. She spoke this beautiful poem, which now we sometimes read at weddings. I've often wondered how often the bride and groom, and others, know that this love poem was spoken first from a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law:

"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!"

They're beautiful words, and a profound statement of love. But these are not just words. This is risk-taking. Ruth is leaving her homeland, and her best chance at security and a future, to follow this woman whom she loves.

What kind of woman is Naomi? Is she an extraordinarily kind mother-in-law? We don't know. We do know that she describes herself as bitter, at least by the time her husband and sons have died. It is this bitter woman that Ruth chooses to follow, to walk beside.

We don't know what town the women were living in in the Moab region, so we don't know exactly how far their journey to Bethlehem would have been. But they have to make it to the other side of the Jordan River, at least 30 miles.

Culturally, the difference was greater. For Naomi, it was a coming home. Even if she was worried about who she would find who would care for them, even if she was nervous about how long she'd been away, still, she knew some things would be familiar. But Ruth was from Moab - a different culture. In Judea, in Bethlehem, she would encounter different foods, different social practices, and a different religion. The Israelites were forbidden by law to deal with people from Moab in any positive way. Ruth was entering, in a very real sense, enemy territory, and she was doing so of her own volition.

Certainly Ruth felt a strong bond with her mother-in-law. Part of the attraction was Naomi's religion. The text never says it specifically, but the story certainly hints at it. There was something about the way this woman lived that drew Ruth to her and caused Ruth to risk her life to follow her, not just to a new land, but to a new way of life.

During these six weeks of Lent, I encourage you to think about your life as a sacred story. How do you think God has been at work in the story of your life? As you have made certain decisions, as you have been led to certain people, can you look back and see the threads of God's pursuit of you? I am not talking about seeing your life as preordained or predestined. I don't believe that. I'm not talking about everything happening for a reason; I don't believe that, either. But I do think that we can see our lives as a journey towards finding purpose. Sometimes we make wrong turns, yet what

we learn from being in those places of wilderness can be powerful life lessons. We often learn more from our mistakes and failures than from our successes.

I don't believe that God puts pain and obstacles in our path so that we can experience the growth that comes from hard lessons. But we can learn and grow from every experience, and see God at work in the new life those wounds eventually create.

God is at work in all of our lives, calling us to go deeper, beyond surface concerns, and calling us to stretch ourselves and take risks.

I wonder if Naomi would have made it all the thirty-miles-plus back to Bethlehem if she hadn't been accompanied by her younger, presumably stronger, daughter-in-law. And here's the rest of the story. When they get to Bethlehem, Naomi makes sure that Ruth is protected in this land in which Ruth is a foreigner. Ruth eventually marries one of Naomi's relatives, a man named Boaz. Ruth and Boaz conceive a child, who is named Obed. Obed later has a child named Jesse, and Jesse later fathers a child named David. That David becomes King David, and he is the ancestor of Jesus.

The fierce love of Ruth for Naomi, the faith that Ruth has in Naomi's faith -- even though she didn't yet have it herself, she saw something in Naomi that she wanted for her own life -- that love and faith are part of the family tree of Jesus. So when Jesus says, "Love your neighbor," he doesn't just mean the neighbor on your street, or the neighbor who looks like you; he's drawing on his own sacred family story and telling us to love any one who is in need. When Jesus says, "Love your neighbor as yourself," he's been influenced by the stories of these two ancestors.

Ruth's love for Naomi reminds us that love is an action. It's not just words, it's surely not just feelings. Love is the risks we take for the sake of others. It's not just for

couples, it's not bound by gender. Love is the sibling who rearranges her life to take care of her sister who is ill. Love is the grandparent who adopts the grandchild in need of stability. Love is the couple who takes in foster children, the neighbor who delivers soup and shovels sidewalks. Love is the teacher who goes the extra mile for the child who needs extra attention, love is the anonymous donation to the family in over their head. Love is one church member driving another to chemo treatments, love is the church open to resettling refugees, the church that houses the homeless. Love is action that takes risks.

One writer puts it this way:

“Christianity is profoundly counterintuitive -- ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself’ -- which I think properly understood means your neighbor is as worthy of love as you are, not that you’re actually going to be capable of this sort of superhuman feat. But you’re supposed to run against the grain. It’s supposed to be difficult. It’s supposed to be a challenge.”

Love is the volunteer who gives up a week’s vacation to chaperone the mission trip, and love is the college student who foregoes spring break to build houses for Habitat for Humanity. Because somewhere in his sacred story are experiences of church mission trips, and parents who encouraged them, and he will be passing along a legacy of love eventually too.

I hope that you have, in your memory bank, the knowledge that you were accepted and loved and nudged to be your best, by a parent or grandparent, or a teacher who saw your potential. And if you don’t have that memory, and unfortunately

not everyone does, I hope that you have seen God at work in your life, redeeming the pain of your childhood so that it is not repeated.

What kind of love needs to be poured out into our world right now? It is a sport, in the world out there, to belittle people, to spew hatred, to look for faults and then magnify them. In this political season, if nastiness is not coming out of the mouths of candidates, you can sure find it among the throngs of people following them. It is not civil discourse; it is anger turned personal.

At one of our Moms Groups discussions this week, one mother said, "I can't have the news on when my seven-year-old is in the room. It's too disturbing." This is the world in which our beloved children are growing up. Are we going to let those words and images be the only ones to which they're exposed? Or are we going to tell them other stories, sacred stories? Are we going to be sure they also hear words of love, grace, forgiveness and acceptance? Are we going to tell them that even though racism is rampant, there are people battling against it? Are we going to show them that even though homophobia still exists, there are places where, truly, all people are welcome?

Love is not a popular song or a holiday in February. Love is fierce and risk-taking and countercultural. Love is a woman who would follow her mother-in-law into a strange and inhospitable place, trusting the nudging of the Spirit. Love is a man who spoke out on behalf of those everyone else ignored or laughed at, a man who knew that the rules came second to the call to compassion, a man whose love was nothing but risky, a man who gave his life for the sake of love. We think of him during these six weeks. We think of the way he lived, and the way he died. He is our ancestor, he has given us our sacred story, and in his name we, too, are called to live and love.