



FAMILY ENRICHMENT DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Wednesday, September 16, 2009

Rudy Rasmus, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Pastor, St. John's United Methodist Church, Houston, TX

Lection - Ruth 1:1-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 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.

(v. 2) The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. (v. 3) But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. (v. 4) These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, (v. 5) both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

(v. 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 had consideration for his people and given them food. (v. 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. (v. 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. (v. 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. (v. 10) They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” (v. 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? (v. 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, (v. 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.” (v. 14) Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

(v. 15) So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” (v. 16) But Ruth said, “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. (v. 17) 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!”

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

In the Hebrew bible, the book of Ruth is found in a section called the Five Festal Scrolls (*megilloth*) which also includes the books of Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther. Jewish liturgical practice called for the reading of Ruth during the celebration of Pentecost, because the story is set right after the wave sheaf offering had been made, and the time of Pentecost had come. Written during the time of Judges, the book of Ruth represents the experience of one coming into a relationship with God and the people of God. This book deals with lack and plenty, and with grief and joy. Hunger and lack initially drives a family away from their home and God’s provision brings them back.

African American families have endured chattel slavery, Reconstruction, segregation, redlining, the prison industrial complex, drug trafficking and too much more to name. However, we have always leaned on God to make a way out of no way and to help us fight on and go on. This moment on the calendar encourages us to continue the fight to make our families stronger and to bring them closer to the only One on whom we can always depend—God.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Ruth 1:1-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Every significant relationship and every experience is a classroom to teach us valuable lessons. From some people we learn to love God and people no matter what. From others, like my dad, the lessons are more complicated. From him, I learned the value of hard work, honesty, and shrewd business practices. But for most of my life, dad didn't trust people outside the family, not even those who had proven to be trustworthy. In that way, his example was a negative one, but even negative examples can teach us valuable lessons.

As you look back at your own experiences and forward to the text, you can learn some important lessons from those who were good role models, and you can learn equally important lessons by observing what appear to be negative models in your life. God has given us both to strengthen us as members of the family of God and the family of man.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Two central points emerge from the text in the wake of grief. First, we see the intensity of Ruth's commitment to stay with her mother-in-law, her family. The other point deals with the power of suffering in motivating us to choose new ways in which our lives will be expressed regardless of the circumstances. Author Henri Nouwen once observed, "The dance of life finds its beginnings in grief ... Here a completely new way of living is revealed. It is the way in which pain can be embraced, not out of a desire to suffer, but in the knowledge that something new will be born in the pain."¹

It has been said that a person can live for weeks without food, days without water, and minutes without air, but it is impossible to live one second without hope. The transitions initiated by the death of a loved one are often only comforted by the presence of family. Death caused Orpah to exit the family, while the dance of life commenced for Naomi and Ruth with hope in the future.

Because of the sovereignty of God, Ruth, a Moabite woman, became one of Jesus' grandmothers. The Bible reminds us eight times in four chapters that she was a Moabite woman. That was the Hebrew writers' way of telling us that Ruth was not Jewish by birth and, subsequently, was not entitled to the privileges and benefits of those who were born and raised as Jews. She was not only lost, she was hopelessly lost, and the entire weight of the Sinai laws stood between Ruth and any hope of survival or significance. There was plenty working against her making the A-list on Jesus' family tree, but God was up to something.

The sovereignty of God means that, regardless of the rules, when God gets ready to move on your behalf, God can break rules, bend regulations, flip policies, and can even change minds.

Ruth was married to the now deceased Mahlon, who was the son of the deceased Elimelech, who left Bethlehem with his wife Naomi ten years earlier because of a famine, and died as soon as he moved to Moab. All of the men in this family are dead. Naomi's husband Elimelech was dead; Naomi's son Chilion was dead; and her son Mahlon who

was married to Ruth was also dead. Without husbands, sons, or men to take care of them in the men-only world of Israel are three widows living together in Moab, pooling their meager resources, struggling for survival, trying to get by the best way they could, but the future looked bleak.

A crisis came for Ruth when her mother-in-law, Naomi, who has lost a husband and two sons, announced that it was time to return home to Bethlehem. Naomi encouraged her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab. Orpah chose to stay in the familiarity of Moab, but Ruth could only see a meaningless future without the presence of her mother-by-marriage. In that moment, Ruth made the choice to go with her mother-in-law assuming that wherever Naomi was going was better than staying where she was. She begged to go with Naomi saying:

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.(v. 16) Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. (v.17)

Ruth did as so many African Americans have and continue to do; refashion family as required. Ruth had come to trust in Naomi's God, surely due to the model that Naomi had presented via her life. Trust is another word for faith, and faith is often the by-product of meaningful relationships, like the one between Naomi and Ruth. When Ruth left Moab, she left the other gods behind, because she had seen something in her new mother, Naomi, that made her declare that nothing mattered more than that relationship.

Verse 16 is so profound, not because Ruth proclaims that she will follow Naomi to the ends of the earth, nor because she would claim her family as her own. It is profound that Ruth would also choose and claim for herself faith in Naomi's God. Our families would be forever enriched if adults lived as examples that would allow their kindred to want to follow them, not necessarily physically, but in the area where it matters most—their walk of faith. In these times of great travail, many are standing in positions as difficult as those encountered by Naomi and Ruth. What will families do? Who will provide the leadership that ultimately enriches the family's closeness to God and the ways of God?

You didn't choose your family, but you can choose how you will relate to their roles in your life, even if they are crazy. Ruth chose to take the path toward redemption without knowing how the ultimate process would work its way through her life to the ultimate end. In becoming family to Ruth, Naomi became an escort to Ruth's future redemption. We often need escorts to get us in position for God to do something significant in our lives; and our family; by blood or surrogacy, plays a significant role in this. It is like that with our redemption. Long before we knew who God was he was working to initiate a chain of circumstances that in the end would bring us face to face with Christ. He was escorting us to our destiny.

The two women made the journey back home to Bethlehem where they were greeted by family and friends. (v. 19) All the city was excited because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” (v. 20). But she said to them, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me.” In spite of bitter experiences, Naomi knew that if she could get home to her family, her problems would give way to provision and all would be well.

In Bethlehem, acting on the instructions of Naomi, Ruth begins to toil and glean the left over grain from Boaz’s fields. One of the challenges we often face is giving up before God can show up. Ruth continued to toil. Ruth trusted the instruction of an elder family member who was close to God.

In the critical next step of Ruth’s redemption, she meets Boaz who falls for her. So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. The Bible generally demonstrates redemption in one of two ways -- either by power or by purchase. Boaz redeemed Ruth and her family through purchase. In the same fashion, in Bethlehem, coming through twelve generations, Jesus redeemed the human family by purchasing our redemption with his life.

Celebration

I believe that even in the midst of all that she had lost, Ruth saw something hopeful in staying with Naomi. Thank God for family and family loyalty. Although we have come through much in this country that has destroyed and weakened our families, we are still here and still celebrating the blessing of family. No, our family members are not always the perfect people we want them to be. However, thanks be to God that we have the privilege of living before them as examples that will help them cling to us and our example as we point them towards God. Not because we are perfect examples, but because of the God that shines so brightly through us.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: Naomi depressed; Orpah kissing her mother-in-law goodbye; Ruth clinging to Naomi;

Sounds: Famine; hunger pains; women weeping; questions; foot steps on the road home;

Colors: Grey (uncertainty, death and famine); and

Smells: The smell of death; and the smells of the spring barley harvest.

Note

1. Nouwen, Henri J. M., and Michael Ford. The Dance of Life: Weaving Sorrows and Blessings into One Joyful Step. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2005. p. 56.

