

## FALLEN HEROES SERMON SERIES

RUTH – Ruth 1:1-16

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Ruth is one of the most interesting books in the Hebrew scriptures. It's the eighth book in the Bible and is wholly different than any book that has come before it. The first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy - tell the story of God's creation of the world and God's attempt to forge a relationship with a stubborn, recalcitrant humanity, who would much rather do their own thing than listen to the One who created them. In the midst of those books, God gives the people laws on how they are to live. Those laws are called the Torah, which is also the Jewish name for those first five books.

The sixth book, Joshua, tells the story of the Israelites moving into the land God promised them, and the seventh book, Judges, recounts the series of early leaders who ruled the Israelites. And then comes Ruth. Up to this point, the books have given us a big-picture view of God and God's people as they figure out how to be in relationship with each other. With the book of Ruth, the Bible hits the pause button on the macro narrative and instead zooms in on one particular story about one particular family.

The fact that Ruth's story is even in the Bible is astonishing. Ruth is often lifted up as a paragon of loyalty, but we have to remember that Ruth is not an Israelite, one of God's chosen. She's a Moabite, one of the enemy nations who will be in constant conflict with Israel. And yet, not only is Ruth given as an exemplar of faith, her story is given a whole book in the Bible, one of only two books out of the 66 named for a non-Jew (the other is the gospel of Luke). We'll learn later that Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus.

You heard the first part of the story just now. Elimelech and his wife Naomi, both Israelites, flee their homeland because of a famine and settle in Moab, one of the foreign nations surrounding Israel. While there, their two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Elimelech dies, as do the two sons, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-laws as widows. Naomi decides to return to Israel but tells Orpah and Ruth that they should stay in Moab with their people. Orpah agrees, but Ruth makes this courageous statement of faith and loyalty. Let me read it in the King James, because there's something powerful and poetic about that translation:

“And Ruth said, ‘Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me.’”

So Naomi acquiesces to Ruth's plea and Ruth the Moabite goes to live with Naomi in Israel. She adopts her mother-in-law's customs, worships her God, and eventually marries Boaz, an Israelite man. In essence, Ruth gives up her identity as a Moabite in order to assimilate into Israelite culture. When Ruth pledges herself to Naomi, she makes a calculated decision to give up her identity as a Moabite in order to fit into the Israelite culture in which she is going to live. As an immigrant, she's going to do her best to fit in, to not stand out among the natives in order not to invite persecution and ridicule.

Did Ruth do the right thing? Was it OK for her to abandon who she was, her heritage and history, in order to survive? This is a tough nut to crack for me, especially right now in our country. I remember in middle school Social Studies, I learned about the two very distinct ways our diverse country was defined. One was the melting pot, in which all ethnicities and

nationalities melted into one, that of American. Like Ruth, everyone was encouraged to forgo their origins for the sake of being American. The other idea was the salad bowl, in which everyone held onto who they were, mixing together and existing side by side, like the carrots and cucumbers and lettuce and brisket in a salad. Wait, you don't put brisket in your salad?

So which is right? Melting pot or salad bowl? In the Bible, Paul reminds us that there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female, but we are all one in Christ Jesus, which seems to promote the idea of the church being a spiritual melting pot. That certainly fits our denomination's way of understanding what it means to be God's people. We claim that unity is our polar star, so we focus on those things that bring us together, not that make us distinct. One author said one of our founding fathers, Alexander Campbell, was a cold-blooded rationalist who was not at all demonstrative in his faith. That's true of Crestwood, as well. In my almost 12 years of preaching here, I've not once had someone say "Amen" during my sermon. I'm going to assume that's NOT because you're never agreed with me, but because that's not how we express ourselves in worship. Alexander Campbell didn't use his faith to express his unique identity, and neither do we. When we come to this place, we are not Moabites or Israelites, we are not Kentuckians or Floridians, we are not Chevy Chasers or Shadelanders, we are Christians. We are Ruth disciples, giving up our individual identity to melt into the one body of Christ.

That works great for us because, for the most part, we are not particularly defined by our ethnicity. We've never had to stop and think how our English or Irish or German heritage impacts our ability to make it in this world today. But there are others who do have to consider that, because the color of their skin or their accent or the way they dress or their beliefs are much more visible and not always accepted by the majority in this country. It's easy for us to insist that those not like us should become like us, should melt into the larger culture, should give up who they are to become "one in Christ Jesus," but it's always easy to insist that when you're not the one who has to give up something. Ruth made that choice. Next week, we'll be looking at Esther, who chose to hold onto her Jewish ethnicity at the risk of death.

Melting pot or salad bowl? Which is right for the church? For our country? I don't know, but I can suggest what our role is in that process. As is often the case with Jesus, when presented with an either/or, melting pot or salad bowl, Jesus provides a third way. Is it possible to be one in Christ Jesus while still allowing others to be themselves? After all, when we invite people to the table each Sunday, we don't put up any restrictions or acceptance criteria. Moabites are welcome here, aren't they? Instead of requiring conformity, we make room for diversity. If we can do that at this table, can we do that in other areas of life, like our neighborhoods and our circle of friends and our community and country leaders?

That's a huge struggle in our country, where assertions by minorities about the worth of their heritage is often met with resistance and insistence that they should be like everyone else. Do Black lives matter or do all lives matter? Does that have to be an either/or? Can both matter while we focus on the injustice and oppression that is perverting God's kingdom here on earth? Are those of us in the majority willing to give up some of our power and influence for the greater good of our country, to make sure the Moabites feel as safe and welcomed as we do? We can hold to our own stories while listening to the stories of others and finding places of understanding and connection. Where is God in our stories? Where do our stories overlap? What must it be like to live the other person's story?

Joey Jeter, Disciples preaching professor, tells the story of a Korean student who was given an assignment to preach on a certain biblical passage, Mary's Magnificat. When the time came for her student sermon, she walked to the front of the sanctuary and began to dance, halting

at first, but then with more grace and power, finishing with a flourish of motion. Jeter said he was transfixed, but ultimately gave her a bad grade because she didn't complete the assignment as he put it forth.

Years later, Jeter came across a chapter in a book by that same student, who told this story:

“When I was seven, my mother and I traveled to a small remote village in southwestern Korea to visit my aunt. No bus or train service was available. We had to go over the mountain and cross the river. I was exhausted from walking so long on the dusty road under a hot summer's sun. Mom had been tell me about how she and her sisters swam in the river when they were children. So when we came to the river, she jumped in. I was shocked. We were respectable people. How could she do this? I looked to see if there were any other people around. I did not approve of my mother's behavior at all. At last she got out of the water, but the situation got worse. She began singing a song I had never heard. And she danced while she was singing. Humiliation and confusion made me cry. ‘Mom, stop it! Stop it!’ I screamed, but she kept dancing until finally, because of my continuous crying, she stopped.”

The student finished the chapter with a plaintive letter, which read, “Dear Mom, come and dance again. I'll join you this time, not crying but laughing. And Mary will sing the Magnificat for our dance.” She reclaims the dance of her mother and the mother of Jesus and brought them together. Thankfully, Jeter said, the student was gracious enough not to mention the idiot professor who refused to look beyond his own narrow parameters and the Spirit of God at work.

We are called to be one in Christ Jesus, but we have to be careful that we don't define “one” as “like us.” In a world where the melting pot of conformity to the majority is in conflict with the salad bowl of claiming one's unique identity, I'd like to suggest a third way, so well represented in this sanctuary. That is a mosaic. Our stained glass windows and cross are visible reminders that we can come together in our uniqueness to form a larger, more richer picture of what God's kingdom looks like. These pieces of art would be drab if they were all one color. No color is more prominent or prevalent than another, and all are held together to present a more powerful picture than any one piece of glass could do by itself. Christ binds us together in all our diversity to present to this world an image of God's kingdom. The blues don't insist that the oranges change their colors. Instead, there's room for everyone.

My prayer for us today is that we followers of Christ work for and witness to another way, a better way, in which our unity in Christ Jesus is created, not in spite of our diversity, but through it. May we claim the deeper bonds that tie us together, the ones that connect us at the level of a shared humanity. We should all be willing to sacrifice some of who we are for the greater good of unity. May that grace and generosity start with us, and may our only desire as followers of Christ be that others are able to fully be themselves. Moabites are welcome here.