

Sermon October 31 2021 Gregory Mobley

SCRIPTURE: Ruth 1:1-18 (translated by Gregory Mobley)

It was during the days when the warlords decided what was right, and there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah went to seek whatever he could find in the fields of Moab. It was he, his wife, and his two sons. 2The name of the man was Elimelek (“My-God-is-King”), the name of the woman was Naomi (“Sweetie”), and the names of the two sons were Mahlon (“Skinny”) and Chilyon (“Scrawny”). They were Ephratites from Bethlehem in Judah. They arrived in the fields of Moab. So that is how they came to be there. 3But then Elimelek, Naomi’s husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4They married Moabite women. The name of the first was Orpah (“Chanel”) and the name of the second was Ruth (“Amity”). Then they settled in there for ten years. 5But then both of them, Mahlon and Chilyon, died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. 6So she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the fields of Moab because she had heard that the LORD had visited his people by giving them bread. 7So she set out from her place there—her two daughters-in-law with her—and started walking down the road to return to Judah. 8And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: “Go, return, each to the house of her mother. Return, my daughters. May the LORD show the same kindness to you that you have shown toward the dead and those still standing. 9May the LORD allow for you to find a safe haven, each in the house of her husband.” Then she kissed them. Then they raised their voices and wept, 10and said to her, “Never. We will return with you, to your people.” 11And Naomi said: “Why should you go with me? Are there still any sons in my belly that could become husbands for you? 12Return, my daughters, go! For I am too old even to be with a man. For even if I thought I still had any prospects left, even if I were with a man this night and then bore sons, 13would you wait until they grew up? Would you bar yourself from being with a man? No, my daughters. For that would be even more bitter for me. The hand of the LORD has struck me.” 14And they raised their voices and wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth: she clung to her. 15Then Naomi said: “Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her mother and to her God. Return after your sister-in-law.” 16Then Ruth said, “Stop pestering me to abandon you, to turn back from following you. For wherever you go, I will go; and where you spend the night, I will spend the night. Your people? They’re my people. And your God is my God. 17Where you die, I will die, and there, let me be buried. May the LORD do so to me, and add even more if anything short of Death separates me from you.” 18And when she saw that she was not to be budged from going with her, she quit making speeches to her.

SERMON: “Everyday Saints” The Rev. Dr. Gregory Mobley

Did you get all that in the reading? I mean, the truth is, why do you need preachers? The Bible is good! The opening lines of the Book of Ruth, in the King James it says “In the days that the judges judged.” But I translated it “In the days when the warlords decided what was right.” In the days of the warlords there was a famine in the land. The Book of Ruth is set in the days of the judges. In the Bible, the era of judges is an era of political and moral chaos. When the land had no rest from out-of-control men whose whims – not Torah – was their constitution which defined justice.

These warlord judges included a guy named Abimelech who assassinated all his brothers to take over. These warlord judges included Samson who couldn't keep his hands off of women. These warlord judges included a man named Jephtha whose big mouth led him into trouble. He made a hasty vow which had fatal consequences for his daughter. Does somebody somewhere remember that story?

And then the story of Ruth begins, mainly set in Bethlehem. But can't you already see how in this little town all the hopes and fears of all the years will be met? There was a famine in Judah. And for poor people on either side of the Jordan River – because Judah and Moab were separated by the Jordan River. Moab was what we would know now as southern Jordan. So we're at a border, but for poor people on either side of the Jordan – and it might as well have been the Rio Grande – the political border between Israel and Moab was meaningless. The only border that counted was between the countries of Famine and Harvest.

So a family left Judah to be refugees in Moab. The family consisted of a man named Elimelek, his wife Naomi whose name means "Sweetie," and their two sons Mahlon and Chilyon. The two sons' names mean "Scrawny" and "Skinny." And the ancient Charles Dickens who wrote this story is trying to tell you that they're as good as dead already. In Moab, the sons married Moabite girls. Orpah's name means "Perfume," so let's call her "Chanel." Ruth's name means "Friendship," so we'll call her "Amy." But then Elimelek died – and we can see this coming – Scrawny and Skinny died. And Naomi decided to return home to Bethlehem. Orpah decided to stay in Moab.

And that's when this story takes us to a crossroads where two widows have an argument. Naomi embodies an entire society. Later in the Book of Ruth she will lament: Don't call me Naomi (Sweetie). Call me Marah (Bitter). And later she will say: I used to be full. But now I feel empty. At this crossroads, then, in a time of famine, in a time of bitter, in a time of empty, and a time of a kind of pandemic, what gives? When everyone is empty, when everyone is bitter, when there is a famine of bread and kindness and tolerance, what gives?

Well, in our story, Ruth gives. Though by all appearances, she had nothing. She had no husband, she'd left the protection of her birth family, she's going to a foreign land, she had no standing, no resources, no status, no prospects, no network. Ruth was off the social grid. But then, Ruth rummaged around. Ruth dug deep into her soul's purse. And she found that she had a widow's mite of something. Ruth had the power of a personality created in the divine image. Ruth had the power of a free soul, and she could make a promise and intend by God's grace to keep it. By worldly standards Ruth had nothing, yet Ruth had something the world can't give and the world can't take away. Ruth had the gold of her soul's treasure. Ruth had the ability to be faithful.

The Hebrew word that's used in this book over and over again is *chesed*, which means an undefeatable commitment to do what's right for love's sake. I use the word "undefeatable" because that's a word you heard already in our story, where it says Naomi could see Ruth wouldn't budge. After Ruth says those great lines that you know from so many wedding ceremonies – "Where you go I will go." Maybe it was in some of your wedding ceremonies? "Where you lodge I will lodge." After Ruth says that, Naomi seemed to have seen a certain quality in Ruth, a quality that put an end to all her speechifying. The quality of Ruth's cussed

faithfulness is conveyed by a Hebrew word *mitametsit*. That's what that word "she wouldn't budge" is. And that is also used in the Bible to describe soldiers who take a stand in one of those Braveheart-like scrums of ancient battles, and refuse to panic or flee. Semper fi! That's what Ruth was like. She took a stand. Ruth's small investment of courage and compassion changed everything in our story. It was warlords and famine, and then Ruth simply makes a personal gesture of kindness and faithfulness, and it changes everything in the story.

Maybe you know the rest of the story about this time of warlords and famine, emptiness and bitterness. A recent immigrant named Ruth, a widow named Naomi, and third character who shows up later named Boaz – an old maid of a man. They take turns tending each other's plots and advancing each other's plots. They take turns filling the holes in each other. They take turns bringing in the sheaves and bringing out the best in each other.

And then at the end of the Book of Ruth, there is a toy surprise at the bottom of this story about Crackerjack personalities. Because under the cover of a cloak in the middle of the story, Boaz and Ruth conceive. And once born, that child will be nursed by Naomi. And many harvests later a child would be born: Ruth's great-grandson David. And 28 generations later, unto us a Child was born.

The story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz is "Tinker to Evers to Chance" ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baseball%27s\\_Sad\\_Lexicon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baseball%27s_Sad_Lexicon)). It's an O'Henry story about common folks who lose, then gain, everything. Providence reshuffles the deck and turns discards into face cards. Ordinary folks who don't count for much yield the King of Hearts: David. And a small act of lovingkindness changed – reset – the entire operating system. Ruth wrote a check she didn't know she'd be able to cover, and it had a Keynesian effect ([https://www.google.com/search?q=keynesian+economics&rlz=1C1EODB\\_enUS510US539&oq=keynse&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0i10i433l2j46i10i433j0i10i131i433j0i10i15.7352j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=keynesian+economics&rlz=1C1EODB_enUS510US539&oq=keynse&aqs=chrome.1.69i57j0i10i433l2j46i10i433j0i10i131i433j0i10i15.7352j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)). It jumpstarted the entire economy.

Soon, Naomi got her mojo back, and she started matchmaking. That's how Boaz and Ruth got together. Then this man named Boaz, the Sergeant Pepper of this Lonely Hearts Club, enters the story, shows kindness to a stranger, and finds himself with company one night in his sleeping bag. And soon, the famished land becomes shalom city. Each character giving, each character receiving, each character the hero of the other's story.

Famine to harvest. Aloneness to family. Empty to full. Bitter to sweet. All set in motion by a single gift. The moral of this story, boys and girls, is simple. Do you remember a song from youth group? "It only takes a spark to get a fire going." Anybody got a light?

By the way, the story of Ruth doesn't take place in Jerusalem or Babylon. It took place in Bethlehem. Ruth wasn't in Manhattan or Washington. She was in her local village in her Stockbridge. This is a beatitude of the story where the meek inherit, the hungry and thirsty are filled, the peacemakers see their hopes – not the warlords' schemes – come to life. It's a story about golden people with unrealized royalty in them. Everyday people, country people. And how a single courageous act of lovingkindness can start a quiet revolution against the warlords.

You can hear political undertones in this story, because we live in a time of a certain kind of famine. We have the virtue of an immigrant named Ruth. We have Naomi's bitterness, and we feel so much bitterness around us.

But today I also want to engage the personal. I have no idea what you carried in with you this morning. Are some of you having bitterness? Do some of you feel empty? Are you famished in some way? Dig deeper into your soul's purse to the miracle that you were born at all, to the God-given power that knew and knitted you together in the womb, and that has safeguarded you on that 40-week incredible journey from watery chaos to the spark and spank of life. Stand on that bedrock. Refuse to panic or flee. Light the spark, and pass it on. Because I'm convinced that neither height nor depth nor any powers can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Oh sure, we should be vigilant citizens and political activists. But the story of Ruth also reminds us that the foundation of all social change is the everyday faithfulness and moral integrity of everyday saints who do their honest best at home, in neighborhoods, in parishes, in their little Bethlehems and Stockbridges. Golden people who attempt to live by Golden Rules. People who practice empathy toward strangers. People who borrow and lend their cups of sugar, and borrow and lend their quarts of the milk of human kindness to each other.

The story of Ruth reminds us that the most radical political act any of us can make is to declare our candidacy for neighbor.

*Our guest pastor: Gregory Mobley is a scholar of the Hebrew Bible fascinated by the way its composers and interpreters made and continue to make meaning through narrative, as seen in his most recent book, *The Return of the Chaos Monsters—and Other Backstories of the Bible* (Eerdmans, 2012). Mobley has also written about biblical heroic narratives in *The Empty Men: The Heroic Tradition of Ancient Israel* (Anchor Bible Reference Library, 2005) and *Samson and the Liminal Hero in the Ancient Near East* (T & T Clark, 2006). With co-author T. J. Wray, Mobley wrote *The Birth of Satan: Tracing the Devil's Biblical Roots* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Mobley is also active in Jewish-Christian dialogue and co-edited with Jennifer Peace and Or Rose, *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation* (Orbis, 2012). A native of Kentucky and an ordained Baptist minister, Mobley began his teaching career at Union Theological Seminary (1996-97), then taught at Andover Newton Theological School from 1998-2016. He received his Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University (1994).*