

I've Been Meaning to Ask: Where Do We Go From Here?

Ruth 1 (The Message)

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This is the final Sunday of 4 for our series asking questions that lead to courageous conversations. We began with the question “where are you from?” and we learned that the answer is always more than what appears on the surface; it’s a gateway into who we are and what matters to us. We asked “where does it hurt?” and we heard powerful testimonies about pain and grief and we saw that when we share what hurts, it doesn’t make us unlovable—it makes us real and human. Last week, we held the question “what do you need?” and we sat with how hard that question is to answer; and Zeena asked if we might see our needs not as burdens for others but as gifts we give to each other that bind us together.

So now that these questions have kind of re-awakened us in this late pandemic moment to the fact that God makes us for each other, where do we go from here? Where do these questions lead us? What’s next for us as a church?

Truth is, it’s a hard time to be the church. Someone said to me the other day that it’s a hard time to be in any profession. That’s true. But we are beginning stewardship today, the time of year we ask you to commit to this church. We roll out new programs and talk about big plans to raise big bucks for mission and education and building and personnel.

That feels hard right now. Who can make plans? Who knows how much longer we will stay in COVID-tide, neither together nor apart? It’s harder than ever to secure volunteers—we’re scared and cautious, with good reason. Many church leaders say that folks who stopped coming to worship during the pandemic won’t come back. Their lives changed. Their withdrawal from church will accelerate the larger trend of folks dropping out of religion entirely.

So... where do we go from here? How do we face a future that holds uncertainty? I want us to take our cues today from an old story from Scripture. It’s the book called “Ruth.” We will read the first chapter from the Message. Listen to how these two human beings, Naomi and Ruth, live in their own moment of deep uncertainty:

1 ¹⁻² Once upon a time—it was back in the days when judges led Israel— there was a famine in the land. A man from Bethlehem in Judah left home to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The man’s name was Elimelech; his wife’s name was Naomi; his sons were named Mahlon and Kilion—all Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They all went to the country of Moab and settled there.

³⁻⁵ Elimelech died and Naomi was left, she and her two sons. The sons took Moabite wives; the name of the first was Orpah, the second Ruth. They lived there in Moab for the next ten years. But then the two brothers, Mahlon and Kilion, died. Now the woman was left without either her young men or her husband.

⁶⁻⁷ One day she got herself together, she and her two daughters-in-law, to leave the country of Moab and set out for home; she had heard that God had been pleased to visit his people and give them food. And so she started out from the place she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law with her, on the road back to the land of Judah.

⁸⁻⁹ After a short while on the road, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, “Go back. Go home and live with your mothers. And may God treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. May God give each of you a new home and a new husband!” She kissed them and they cried openly.

¹⁰ They said, “No, we’re going on with you to your people.”

¹¹⁻¹³ But Naomi was firm: “Go back, my dear daughters. Why would you come with me? ... No, dear daughters; this is a bitter pill for me to swallow—more bitter for me than for you. God has dealt me a hard blow.”

¹⁴ Again they cried openly. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye; but Ruth embraced her and held on.

¹⁵ Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law is going back home to live with her own people and gods; go with her.”

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ But Ruth said, “Don’t force me to leave you; don’t make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I’ll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I’ll die, and that’s where I’ll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!”

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ When Naomi saw that Ruth had her heart set on going with her, she gave in. And so the two of them traveled on together to Bethlehem.

Ruth is an old story, but every time I read it, I’m shocked at how current it is.

Ruth is about people who flee the place they love because if they don’t, they will starve and die. The place names are Bethlehem and Moab, but they could be Texas or Clarkston, GA.

You heard what happens to this family. Tragedy layers upon tragedy. Uprooted, far from home, the family deals with loss after loss. First the patriarch, Elimelech, dies. And then Mahlon and Chilion. Naomi, the matriarch, is alone in Moab—with little hope. Unmarried women have no status; they are vulnerable in all the ways your nightmares might imagine. What’s worse, Naomi is in Moab—the story doesn’t say this, but Jews and Moabites are not on friendly terms.

Naomi decides to return home, to Judah. There, maybe she can lean on a social safety net that talks about protecting widows. Naomi starts out carrying all she owns in a bundle on her back, carrying her grief in a bundle in her heart. Or maybe these things are carried by the two young women walking a few paces behind her. Soon, Naomi stops. She speaks to the girls:

“Go home and live with your mothers. And may God treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. May God give each of you a new home and a new husband!”
Naomi kissed them and they cried.

Naomi knows she can’t lead these Moabite girls to her home where she can’t guarantee their safety. She begs them to go. They *weep*. That is a sign that something weird and powerful is going on. *These women should not have an emotional connection*. That’s not a joke about inlaws. The text implies that these girls may have originally been forcefully taken as wives. They need not have any emotional connection to the mother of their abductors. Yet, the idea of not being with Naomi brings the girls to tears. Naomi blesses them: “*may God treat you with **the same loving kindness** that you treated my sons and me.*” That idea—loving kindness. That’s not the last time you hear it in Ruth. It is the bedrock—the subterranean ground of this whole story.

Loving kindness joins these women's lives together. Naomi wants the best for them—even now if that means she loses them from her life.

¹⁰ [Orpah and Ruth] said, "No, we're going on with you to your people."

¹¹⁻¹³ But Naomi is firm: "Go back, my dear daughters. You should not wait to try and get married again. This is bitter for me to swallow—God has dealt me a hard blow."

This Naomi is incredible. She's not unlike Job. She's been dealt this raw deal in life. She never shies away from shaking her fist at God. "God ruined me," she says, in the most honest display of theodicy in Scripture. But in the next moment she demands that God act kindly toward these young women—"treat them, God, better than you treated me."

Orpah kisses her mother-in-law and bids a tearful good bye. Scripture never says she's wrong for doing so. But Ruth "clings" to Naomi. This is the closest physical position a woman takes to another woman in Scripture.

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ Ruth says to Naomi, "Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself will come between us!"

This is a breathtaking vow. Many have heard in it something like a marriage vow—utter devotion given by one human being to another.

Ruth's words to Naomi affirm our basic and elemental need for each other. She evokes Genesis 2, when God says: "it is not good for human beings to be alone." These two women—who grew up in different worlds, prayed to different gods, had different cultures and heart languages, belonged to different generations—life threw them together through hardships none of them had chosen. Still, over years together of sharing life, their differences began to fade; by a thousand small acts of cooperation and kindness in the work of making a daily home, in the slow growth of trust and caring, and then by sharing of grief together, these women changed from being strangers to *beloveds*. Their happiness, their survival, their existence—is bound up with each other and they cannot bear to be apart.

Earlier, I talked about how hard it is to make plans in the church right now because there is so much uncertainty. But the problems in the church feel like small potatoes next to some of the other uncertainties that all of us must face. Democracy is struggling for its survival; civil society is struggling for its survival; our earth is struggling for its survival. The problems that our ours to hold feel so big. It's hard to know what to do. It's hard to know what our next steps are supposed to be. It is easy for us to get overwhelmed; to be paralyzed. It would be easy for us to pretend like the problems are not ours; put our heads down and ignore thm. This is not just a hard time to be the church. It's a hard time to be alive.

When I read this story, I do see it's no harder for us than it was for Naomi and Ruth. In the face of all their challenges, they came up with a plan. Their "plan" was vulnerability. Their plan was

to say to each other, “I need you.” Their plan was “where you go, I will go. Where you live, I’ll live. Your people will be mine. Your God, my God.” Their plan was each other. I don’t mean to give the story away, but their plan worked.

Read the rest of the Ruth story and you’ll see that Ruth and Naomi made lots of other plans and schemes as they tried to figure out how to make a way out of no way. But all of them depended on that moment on the road when Ruth refused to leave Naomi’s side.

Maybe, in this time when making plans seems foolish and hard, our plan as a community, as a church, could be so simple as to have the courage to say to the people whom God has put here with us, “I need you.”

Jill Jacques, our stewardship chair, is going to stand up here in a few minutes and she’s going to give an amazing introduction to our stewardship campaign. And she is going to share some of the plans that your elders have for this church and she will invite your prayers and your commitment. Now, you should know after 11 years serving as your pastors, Beth and I never come to stewardship without plans—maybe they’re more like dreams... or schemes. I’ve got big, fun, crazy plans. Free food on that corner for anyone who needs it, 24 hours a day. A zero carbon footprint within 10 years. A neighborhood food and music festival on the church lawn featuring the best vegetarian food in Georgia—called the “Veg Out.” We will research the history of ownership of the land under this church building to figure out how it this land was tied up in the system of human exploitation called slavery and see whether and to whom we owe reparations. I see a church music program so oozing with awesome that people drive as far to find us as they used to drive when we were the only church in the area where it was safe to be queer and Christian. We have dreams about what this Body of Christ might yet be and do.

But they’re all secondary, they’re all derivative. They won’t happen and they won’t matter, unless we have the vulnerability and the courage to say to look at each other and say, “I need you.”

I know that’s not easy. There’s much around us in our culture and in our upbringing that pushes us into lives of autonomy and self-sufficiency. I’m terrified to admit I need you. Relationships are scary. They implicate us, they involve us.

You know what else relationships do? *They save us.*

The story of Ruth is a salvation story in which two human beings admit that they need each other to survive and pledge to let loving kindness be their guide.

Where do we go from here? It is not possible to know. It is possible to choose *how* we go from here: will we go with courage? Will we go with love? Will we go together?

Where you go, I will go. Where you live, I’ll live. Your people will be mine. Your God, my God.