

Mark 3:31-35
Ruth 1:1-17

Grace Congregational United Church of Christ
October 13, 2019 Kim M. Henning
"Courageous Promise Making"

Grace to you and peace from God who comes to us decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

What would you do?

Elimelech and Naomi are a young married couple in Israel. They are farmers. They live off the land. In the springtime they plant seeds. In the summer, they water, they hoe, and they weed their crops. And come fall they harvest the fruit of their labor.

As happens repeatedly, a famine came upon the land. Elimelech and Naomi plant seeds but nothing grows. The sky above is cloudless. The soil below is like powder.

Elimelech and Naomi talk. What should they do? They think about their sons, Mahlon and Chilion. From three meals a day they cut back to two meals, and from two meals they cut back to one. They think out loud; with no rain there can be no crops; with no crops there can be no food; with no food, they die. Now they hear that things are better across the border, in Moab.

Are you reading between the lines? People years ago could be as touchy about crossing borders as we can be today. Our country is our country. Their country is their country. In their country they talk a different language. In their country they look different. And if they're poor they're only a drain on the economy, some say.

Elimelech and Naomi cross the border into Moab. No, not Moab. You know what's written in Deuteronomy: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt...."

We are all a little off-center with our prejudices. Israel was no different, those people.

Elimelech and Naomi had a decision to make. Do they stay in Israel and die? Or do they move to Moab? Survival wins. They move to Moab; they and their sons and that is where they raise their family. They are foreigners. Their neighbors look at them with crossed eyes. Their neighbors talk about them.

But they're alive. Mahlon grows up and one day comes home with a woman to marry, a Moabite---of course. "I'd like to introduce you to Orpah." And then Chilion comes of age and he too brings home a bride: "Ruth." Now Elimelech dies. Ten years later Mahlon and Chilion die.

My father used to say that life can be a bear. And so it was for those survivors.

I'm looking now through the eyes of Naomi. Think about Naomi. Naomi is a widow living in a foreign country. She's never become 'one of them.' Her religion, the God of Abraham and Sarah, is back in Israel. She's aging.

Her sons have died. One of the practical reasons we have children is to have someone to care for us in our old age. Naomi has no husband, no sons, no relatives.

Her evenings are quiet. Her dinner table is a table of one. It's enough to almost make you give up BUT, Naomi is a woman of faith and Naomi remembers how communities work. And, Naomi heard that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food back home. The decision crystalizes in her mind: "I'm going home."

I'm going home. We all have dreams about the good life. We want to grow old. We want our children to outlive us. We want to die before our spouses die. We all have dreams.

We don't want to be hungry. We don't want to be friendless. We don't want people looking at us like we don't belong. We all have dreams. Naomi knows about broken dreams. "I'm going home." She packs up her belongings.

But before she leaves, she tells her daughters-in-law---the only ones who will miss her probably. I'm going home.

We have three widows. When Naomi makes that announcement, the other two say, "we're going with you." But Naomi puts her foot down. You're being foolish. I don't have any more sons to give you. Be reasonable. You go to your people, and I'll go to mine. You're young, you can start over again.

All three weep. And Orpah says, "you know, Naomi, you're right." Orpah said 'good bye' and left. Naomi now looks at Ruth.... You too. Go be with your sister-in-law.

But now for the very first time Ruth speaks. And the words that came out are about the most powerful you ever did hear. Ruth says,

"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."

Now chances good that you've heard before those words before. And chances are really good that you heard them at a wedding. If you were at yesterday's wedding, you heard those words: where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people."

But the origin of those words was not a wedding. No. The origin of those words is a daughter-in-law speaking to her mother-in-law. They have no blood between them. You know the disrespectful way we can sometimes be with our spouse's family.

But Ruth doesn't play that game. "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!"

So what's happening? Until Ruth speaks, this story is simply painful. Israel is dryer than a dustpan. How will we survive? We have Israel and Moab, a scenario as real as what we here about Mexico and the United States. What do we do with prejudice? We have a story of death, first Elimelech's, then Mahlon's, then Chilion's.

The story bleeds with pain.....until..... Ruth speaks. "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from you." In that world of chaos, Ruth becomes an unconventional promise-maker. I'm not leaving you, she says. I'm not running, I'm not quitting. I'm with you, 'till death do us part.

Now this is not a marital relationship. This is one friend speaking to a second; this is one neighbor speaking to a second; this is one believer in God speaking to a second. "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

This is precisely what Jesus spoke of in this morning's Gospel reading. What are my brothers and my sisters and my parents? You are my brothers and my sisters and my parents.

We have here a covenant. We know about the covenant of Noah, we know about the covenant of Abraham and Sarah, we know about the covenant of Moses, we know about the covenant of Joshua and of David. And here we have a covenant spoken by Ruth. A covenant takes the craziness out of life. A covenant creates trust. A covenant says that in the messiness of life, I make a promise.

What is curious about Ruth's promise is that she becomes selfless in her care and devotion to Naomi. Think about the selflessness of Ruth in our narcissistic (me, me, me) world. Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people, my people; your God, my God.

Ruth is truly a rarity. From her words you can feel selfless compassion. You sense from her this deep empathy. Ruth makes a statement of faith: life is not about me---it is about us; life is about your healing; life is about our togetherness; the good life is about one person blessing second person.

She speaks a vow. She speaks integrity. She stands her ground with another human being.

When I think about Ruth's selflessness, I think about Harriet Tubman who sacrificed herself to rescue other slaves from the south.

When I think about Ruth's selflessness, I think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was safe and comfortable out of Germany during WW II and here in the United States, but decided he had to walk into harm's way in order to care for his people.

When we think of Ruth's selfless, how can we not think about Jesus? Paul says of Jesus, 'he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Oh.....to be loved like that. Oh.....to be loved like that.