



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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NOVEMBER 4, 2018
ALL SAINTS SUNDAY

Whither Thou Goest Ruth 1:1-17; Revelation 21:1-7

This passage may be all that we know from the story of Ruth . . . and for all the wrong reasons. Most of us are familiar with the words that we often hear at weddings: “Entreat 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 (1:16). It does sound more romantic in the King James Version, doesn’t it?

Yet, these words have nothing to do with a wedding. L.D. Johnson, one of my Old Testament professors, would rail against the misuse of this text in wedding ceremonies because, instead of being a sentimental pledge between a husband and wife, Ruth’s words are a bold declaration of loyalty between two grief-stricken women in a male dominated society. I confess that while I loved and respected Dr. Johnson immensely, I do often quote these words when talking about the bold declarations two people make when pledging themselves to one another in marriage. At least he can’t grade me now!

So why read this passage on All Saints Sunday which is not at all about weddings or pledges of loyalty for the future but about loved ones whose memories are rooted in the past? What can Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth possibly offer us today as we struggle with deaths of people we love and miss?

Plenty. The story of Ruth is about death . . . and life. A young Israelite family left their homeland during a famine to find a better life in the enemy land known as Moab. Although they were foreigners, they were accepted and settled into a good life. The young family was happy . . . at least until the father, Elimelech, died. Like so many women, Naomi held steady and raised her sons alone. The two boys married local women and life was good for all five of them . . . until it was not. Both sons died leaving their wives and mother in a precarious situation. Being a widow in a foreign land held no good prospects for Naomi so she decided to return to her home in Bethlehem of Judah. At first she welcomed her daughters-in-law to go with her but soon realized that she had been a foreigner in Moab with a husband but these young women would be foreigners in Israel without husbands. She urged them to stay at home with their families and, hopefully, marry again.

Orpah did remain in Moab but Ruth insisted on going with Naomi. Those beautiful words, “Wither thou goest . . . “ are her pledge to stick by her mother-in-law. They are also words that we would be wise to heed on a day like All Saints Sunday.

Wither thou goest—Wherever you go. Those words are what we need to hear today and any day when death visits and loved ones are suddenly gone. “Which way should I go?” we ask. “What should I do?” The answers eventually come, but what we should all remember is that part of the answer is: Whither thou goest, wherever you go

These three women remind us that there is no one way to react to the death of someone we love. Our relationships and our love are unique and so is our grief. After her husband died and her mother-in-law decided to leave, Orpah chose to remain with what she knew, to hold onto what was familiar and comfortable. My mother loved her morning coffee and after she died, Catherine and Robert wanted to have one of the cups she often filled with her daily brew. My dad wanted to stay in the home they shared for over fifty years because that is where her presence is strongest for him. Staying with what is familiar is often wise in order to avoid making poor decisions in the midst of grief. The familiar supports and comforts us and helps us to find equilibrium again.

When her husband died, Naomi stayed where she was so that her sons could go grow up in familiar surroundings and with people they knew and trusted. When her sons died, however, her heart called her to return to her homeland where relatives and traditions could offer her comfort and security as she grew older. Sometimes the death of a loved one causes us to reevaluate our circumstances and to make wise decisions based on our new needs. Sometimes an older parent moves to be near children. Sometimes former hobbies or volunteer work bring comfort. Naomi knew that her kinfolk in Israel would honor their obligation to look after her and help her if she returned home.

Ruth opted for bolder change. No doubt her affection and loyalty toward Naomi were powerful motivators, but she must also have had some sense of new possibilities that drew her toward a foreign land and a fresh start. Ruth did not want to continue with what she had always known in life nor did she want to rely solely upon her family to look after her. She wanted to experience something new in life. Perhaps she did want to marry again and to have a chance at the life Naomi had enjoyed before grief stepped in. Maybe she was curious about this land Naomi had so often described and the

people who surely must be good and kind like her mother-in-law. Ruth took a risk in leaving everything that she knew and trusted in order to experience something new and good that might be waiting for her. A fresh start, a new look at life, and hope for the future sometimes draw us out of a preoccupation with death to a new engagement with life.

There is no one way to deal with death and grief, but I will remind you of this: each of these women chose to continue living in whatever way was best for her. What was right for Orpah was not good for Ruth. What was best for Naomi was not right for Orpah. What Ruth needed was different from what either of the two other women desired. We each handle death in ways that are unique to us. As philosopher Martin Heidegger put it, we must each find our “path with heart.”

We do not know anything more about Orpah but would assume that she eventually married a nice Moabite man and lived happily ever after. We know that Naomi was welcome home by her kinsfolk and lived out her days in her beloved Bethlehem. And Ruth? Well Ruth met Naomi’s kinsman Boaz and they took a liking to one another. They eventually married and had a son named Obed. A few generations later another child was born in Bethlehem. You might have heard of him. His name was Jesus.

Yesterday when a group of us went to Trenton to help clean up yards for some of the homes that had been flooded, the coordinator gave us directions about what to do in the yards we would visit. When asked about trimming any trees that might be in a yard, she said, “You can cut only what is already dead. Do not cut anything that is green and still alive.” The instruction seemed odd to those of us who like to trim and prune the shrubs and trees in our yards, yet there may be wisdom in that guidance. When death enters our life, we must be careful not to remove the things that still hold life for us. What has already died for us can be laid to rest, but where life still exists, we need to nurture and tend that new growth for we never know what it might mean for us. These three women remind us not to prune the life that is yet to grow. As John reminds us in his the Book of Revelation, God always proclaims, “Behold I make all things new.”

“Wither thou goest” Wherever you go with your grief, you must follow your heart and your best interests. There is no one way to grieve. There is no one way to keep on living. There is no one way to open yourself to the blessings God continues to offer you. Wither thou goest—God goes with you and brings you life. Thanks be to God. Amen.

November 4, 2018

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Holy God, who comes to make all things new, the heavens tell of your glory and the earth sings your praises, from the vibrant colors that accent our world to the gentle songs of the birds that fill the air. All that you have created points to a God, who, out of extravagant love, gives not only what is necessary and useful for life, but also what is meaningful, enjoyable, and beautiful. Out of your great love, you invite us to feast at your table, walk beside us in every season of life, and call us to share in your work of redemption. Before we were yet born, you, O Lord, were with us and have cared for us. In the dark moments of our lives, you have been the light that will not fail. We praise you for your constant goodness to us and your faithful presence with us.

Eternal God, hope of all who trust in you, in Christ you weep with those who mourn even as you call us forth from death to new life. On this day of remembrance and celebration, we are grateful for the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before us. We praise you for those faithful men and women whose lives have given witness to the example and teachings of Christ, who have given unselfishly for the sake of others, and who have worked for the causes of peace and justice in our world. From their example of courage and diligence, may we learn to love you with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. With joyful hearts and with voices strong and clear, may we join that great chorus of saints who forever sings praise to your holy name.

We seek your guidance and peace in the week ahead, Merciful God, as we make decisions and elect leaders who will help to shape our nation, state, and community. Grant us the discernment to choose wisely and to seek unity whatever the outcomes. Give us the grace to build bridges of understanding and to love even those with whom we disagree. Help us to work for the good of all, knowing that regardless of age or gender or race, no matter the language spoken or the faith practiced or the party supported, we all carry your image within us and are, therefore, sisters and brothers in the human family. As we prepare to gather around your table, remind us that we are your saints not by our own inclination or strength but through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ our Savior, in whose name we offer this and all our prayers. Amen

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