

A Pledge of Allegiance
Ruth 1:1-22
November 1, 2015
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If you had a chance to read the Scripture text from Ruth this week in the church email newsletter, you may have noticed two things. First, that it was only 8 verses long and ended in the middle of a thought. That's my fault; in my haste I gave Harper bad information. The second thing you might have noticed is that the translation Harper used for the newsletter was from *The Message*, and in that version the book of Ruth starts, "Once upon a time..." I like that because just like the beginning of a fairy tale or folk story the phrase gets us ready to settle in for a long narrative that may or may not be literally true but is closely involved with and sheds light on the realities ordinary life. Just like the book of Ruth.

So let's start at the beginning of Ruth and Naomi's story. Once upon a time there was a family, a mother, Naomi, a father, Elimelech, and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. They had to leave their home country because of famine (or today it might've been civil war) and emigrate to another country where as refugees they hoped they'd find a new home where they could live and work and have enough to eat and send their kids to school. And they did. But then the father died. Fortunately the sons were old enough to marry local girls and all seemed well. But then 10 years later tragedy struck again and both sons died and the author says simply, "and Naomi was left all alone, without husband or sons." She does have two daughters-in-law, but the author knows, the audience knows and we know that in this very patriarchal society daughters-in-law don't really count. With no men in her immediate family, Naomi stands alone, with no bread winner, no one protector, no one even to speak for her in the public arena.

You may have noticed that even though this book is called Ruth, it is really Naomi's story. And her story is a lot like Job's saga. Like him, everything has been taken from her: her home, her husband, her children, her future. She may still have her health, but she is too old to remarry and too old to have more children. Like Job her world has fallen completely apart and like Job she lays the blame for her misfortune at God's doorstep. She says quite bluntly to her recently widowed daughters-in-law when she is trying to send them back to their own homes, "It has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the God has turned against me" (1:13). Later when her old friends and neighbors come out to welcome her home, she says, "Don't call me Naomi [which means Pleasant One]; start calling me Mara, which means the Bitter One. The Almighty has made my life bitter. I left here full of life, and God has brought me back with nothing but the clothes on my back. Why would you call me Naomi? God certainly doesn't. The Almighty ruined me" (vv. 21-22).

These words may be hard for us to hear. We are much more accustomed to talking about the ways God has blessed us than to attribute our hardships to divine intervention. We talk about God as the giver of all good things, not the One who brings tragedy and wreaks havoc in our lives. But frankly I think there's something healthy in Naomi's ability to name and share her pain and anger. With a kind of confessional clarity and theological acuity she articulates not only her grief, but how it has shaped her life and very identity. Like Job, and Jeremiah, and the Psalmists, she is not afraid to complain to God about her plight and to hold God accountable in some way.

We might do well to let Naomi teach us how to cry out with passion and clarity about our pain and bitterness and reflect on how it has shaped and sometimes even twisted our lives, our hopes and dreams, and even our personalities. Most of us have been brought up to suffer in silence, to just "suck it up" or "get over it." But in doing so we often relinquish the opportunity to really deal with our pain and

then be able to heal. In her book, *Suffering*, German theologian Dorothy Solle writes, “The first step toward overcoming suffering is to find a language...of lament, of crying, of pain, a language that says what the situation is. I consider the stage of lament...to be an indispensable step on the way [not only to personal health but also] to liberation and help for other unfortunate people. The way leads out of isolated suffering through communication to the solidarity in which change occurs....We live in a world that can be changed.”

That’s a lot to take in, but without ever having read Dorothy Solle, Naomi seems to completely understand what she’s saying. She understands the importance of lament and the need for solidarity...and somehow she also seems to realize that her world, despite all evidence to the contrary, can be changed. But without her lament there would be no movement in the story, no interruption to the ongoing despair, no way to change the outcome.

Naomi’s first lament brings her daughters-in-law to their own decision points. Orpah hears the hopelessness in her mother-in-law’s voice and decides to go back home. She makes the expected, reasonable choice when faced with a crisis: go home, go back to what is safe and familiar. Ruth, however, makes the unexpected, we might even say irrational, choice. She has been made aware of the risks and the improbability of success, but she decides to embrace the challenge and commit herself to stand in solidarity with her mother-in-law. Her decision is probably more radical than we can appreciate. Old Testament scholar, Phyllis Trible, paints the picture for us:

“From a cultural perspective Ruth has chosen death over life when she chooses to go with her mil to Bethlehem. She has disavowed the solidarity of family; she has abandoned national identity; and she has renounced her religious affiliation. In the entire epic of Israel, only Abraham matches this radicality...Not only has Ruth broken with family, country, and faith, but she has also reversed sexual allegiance. A young woman has committed herself to an old woman rather than to the search for a husband, and she has made this commitment not just ‘until death us do part’ but beyond death. One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel.”

It’s somewhat ironic, I think, that Ruth’s pledge of allegiance to her mother-in-law has been used throughout the centuries in wedding services, especially in former times with a wife promising her husband, “Whither thou goest, I will go.” What’s ironic is not just that in their original context these beautiful vows were said by one woman to another woman, but that they were said by a young person to a much older one, by someone with a possible future to a person with no foreseeable future. Furthermore what Ruth pledges herself to is an entirely new family system, a brand new country, and a completely different religion! She makes a pledge of allegiance that means she is turning her back on everything that she--and most of us--hold dearly.

Think about your own allegiances for a moment. They’re probably a lot like mine: family, church, country, school, political party, sports team, and so on. I’ve invested a lot of my time, money, and self in those things. If anyone asked me to give up any of them, to switch my allegiances to another country, a different family or religion or even sports team, I’m not sure I could do it. I certainly couldn’t do without a sense of great loss and betrayal. And beyond the sense of disloyalty and dislocation I might feel, would be the sense that *I* was going to have to change! I would have to let go of so much that I hold dear and open myself to all new ways of thinking and doing things.

Ruth was able to do all that, even in the face of very real disaster and despair. Maybe she could do it because she had nothing left to lose. Like that old Janis Joplin song, “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” Well maybe because Ruth had nothing left to lose she had the freedom to switch all

her loyalties and allegiances. But what is truly amazing is that she chooses to throw her lot not with a successful person with a promising portfolio and optimistic attitude, but with an old bitter, broken woman and her suffering, grief, and poverty. I'm sure Ruth understood the harsh realities of life. But she also knew that poverty, grief, and pain do not have to be the final word especially when we face them down together. Ruth embraced radical change and challenge when she committed herself to stand in solidarity with Naomi. And together they made life better for each other and as we'll learn next week, for their entire nation. They stand tall over the centuries as two of the saints, women with incredible courage, imagination, faith and commitment. Agents of change, who bring hope and new life to their world. Like the two widows in last week's sermon, these two widows, invite us to stand in solidarity with them and join the ongoing sacred story with our own pledges of allegiance, faith and courage.