

Narrow Aisles  
Ruth 1:1-18  
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I met a frantic woman. And by frantic I mean really frantic! She was so angry and panicked and upset that she was teetering on the edge of momentary insanity. You know that stage sometimes you are in where your emotions are so strong you can't decide which one be to be first. So this woman, while sobbing and swearing and screaming was trying to communicate to me about the source of her distress. "There's a tree in my driveway." "They cut the tree and it's in my driveway." "The tree...oh the tree in my driveway." Sure enough there was a large tree crossing the base of her driveway. But I saw no cause for great alarm - certainly the tree could be cut up and hauled away. I met this woman in Biloxi, Mississippi nine months after Hurricane Katrina, so a fallen tree or two was to be expected. But this woman was not easily consoled.

It wasn't really about the tree. The tree was just the tip of the iceberg. Her house had been destroyed in the storm that took her son, dispersed her family, and washed away every material possession she owned. And the day that I met her was the day FEMA would finally deliver a temporary home to stand in the place of the debris and the rubble of her life. But if there was a tree in the driveway, the trailer would not be delivered, it would go to another and her name would go on the end of the list. It would mean more months of being displaced, of being homeless, of being hopeless. I couldn't possibly know what that was about, what her tears symbolized, where her panic came from...and a reassuring "chin up" or "look on the bright side" from me would be more than a little patronizing. I did not know and I could not know what her journey had been like. As she started to tell me more about the tree and its implications I started to feel guilty for my rash judgments and quick simplifications of the situation. Her story continued and my guilt deepened. Hadn't I come here to help people like this? Wasn't this the reason I was here? Yet I could do nothing, I could say nothing.

We have all been in situations like this where we just don't know what to say. Our minds panic as we stumble for words. Expressions like, "time heals all wounds," or "It's only up from here" seem to be the only things that jump into our minds. But not only do they sound empty to those on the receiving end; they often are just untrue. Time doesn't heal all wounds, and it's not always up from here...sometimes it's down from here! And for this frantic woman, a cliché from a greeting card would have done little in the face of her crisis.

Ruth found herself in one of these speechless situations with her mother-in-law: her widowed, childless, and now desolate mother-in-law Naomi. Naomi had endured staggering trials; first she lost her husband, making her dependant on her two sons. Then her sons, her last two sources of protection, both died. In the culture of the day a woman without a husband and without sons was destined to a life of poverty. Everything Naomi had was swept out from underneath her as the fragile walls of her world crumbled. Ruth was left without answers to the questions and without comfort for the wounds. There was

no silver lining, no pot at the end of the rainbow, no glass half full analogy that seemed appropriate. Naomi had lost everything, her entire family, her security, her name, her future. She was totally alone and so she did the only thing she knew to do, pack up and move back home to Israel: a land where the places wouldn't be filled with the memories of her past, a land where her reputation as an unfortunate widow might not follow her, a land where life might be easier. Naomi packed for home.

There is a poem called Solitude by Ella Wheeler Wilcox that ends with these words:

Feast, and your halls are crowded,  
Fast, and the world goes by.  
Succeed and give, and it helps you live,  
But no man can help you die.  
For there is room in the halls of pleasure  
For a large and lordly train,  
But one by one we must all file on  
Through the narrow aisles of pain.

Naomi had packed for her lonely journey through her own narrow aisle of pain.

But Ruth wasn't going to let that happen. Ruth was convinced that there was no aisle too small for the both of them. And she makes the famous plea of commitment to Naomi: "Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God." Your grief will be my grief. Your joy will be my joy. Your aisles of pain and shame and regret will now be mine.

We all make commitments in our lives - some that are made publicly, like Ruth's, and some that are made privately or silently or unknowingly. We make vows to our partners for better or worse. We make commitments to aging parents in sickness and health. We make promises to our children for richer or poorer. Kerry and Alex along with their family and this congregation will make promises to Zachary today in his baptism. Promises to raise him in faith, to show him love, to support him in trials, to walk with him down the narrow aisles of pain that will inevitably come.

But why? Why would we do that? I promise Zach will be in no position to pay any of you back, at least not for a very long time. Naomi was in no position to pay Ruth back, not then, not ever. So why would Ruth unconditionally pledge herself to her mother-in-law?

There was nothing that made sense about Ruth's decision to return to Israel with Naomi. Ruth was a Moab woman, she was already in the land of her family. In Moab she would be able to return to her father's home for a time and possibly remarry, start again, have a family, have a life, have a chance. But in Israel not only would she be a foreign woman but she was a widowed foreign woman. Three strikes against her. One commentator says "the significance of this example of solidarity among women is heightened because of their different ages, their ethnic backgrounds from groups traditionally at enmity with one another, and their specific relationship regarded by many

cultures as potentially filled with tension and even discord.”<sup>1</sup> Ruth did not share the same country or religion or bloodline with Naomi, and to top it off Naomi was her mother-in-law! That’s what makes Ruth’s confession of devotion unique. It was not laden with hallmark niceties to pacify Naomi’s grief. Nor was Ruth desperately clinging to an idol of security when she made her commitment. She pledges her devotion and her companionship to someone who can offer her nothing in return.

In Ruth’s culture it made no sense for her to selflessly commit to Naomi. In our culture it makes no sense either to commit to people and places and things that can offer us no return on our investment. We invest our money in companies that show good track records and project future growth in earnings. We donate our time to causes that will give back to us in tangible ways. We want to know what we going to get out of our commitment. We want to know how long it will take, how much it will cost, how it will look on our resumes. So with all of that in mind we could easily write Ruth’s pledge off as a poor investment, bad management, or just erratic and rash decision making. But I doubt the group of scholars who canonized the Bible included the book of Ruth for its comic relief.

The book of Ruth has sometimes been translated or read as a dramatic play, a play with four scenes for the four chapters and three main characters: Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz (a man who comes later in the story). God is cast among the minor characters of the story. Now I don’t know too much about playwrights, scripts, or acting but I know a thing or two about minor characters. When I was younger my parents thought it would be a good idea for me to enroll in the local children’s theater. During my short-lived career as an actress I was cast into three different plays. In the first play I was found in the ranks of the trees. The trees were not given speaking parts but we were allowed to rustle and howl when my friend, the wind, would enter the stage. After the tree gig, I was cast as a caroler in the Christmas Story but instructed not to sing too loudly - “try to blend in Camille.” With success as a tree and a caroler, I made my debut as a sailor, Sailor #7 to be exact. Although again I did not have a speaking role I was instructed to pretend to be tossed about by the wind and the waves on the deck of an imaginary ship, dramatically throwing myself to the ground on two occasions.

In the play starring Ruth and Naomi, God was cast as a minor character, a character that acts on the sidelines, a character who is spoken about but who does not speak. God’s action is not found in this story in dramatic divine interventions like burning bushes, lightening bolts, or parting seas. God’s action happens through the actions of the major characters. As Ruth said, “I will be with you,” Naomi experienced divine presence. As Ruth denied her own ambitions to stay with Naomi, Naomi experienced divine sacrifice. As Ruth followed Naomi back to Israel, Naomi experienced divine faithfulness. It may be that the book of Ruth was included in our Bible because it translates a more common experience with God. It’s not flashy or miraculous in the obvious sense. It is a story of people trying to make sense of the world and of their experiences. It is a story of people trying to live out commitments to one another. It is a story about people trying to find meaning in the sorrows and joys of everyday life. It is a common story because in it we can read our own story.

God could be a major character in the story but God chooses sometimes to be a minor character allowing others the opportunity to shine, to convey meaning, to enlighten lives. Shakespeare, a guy who did know something about playwrights and acting said,

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: they all have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.

All the world's a stage, and it is us who have been cast as major characters in the story of the lives of one another. In this casting, we have been given the opportunity to express to God's people divine presence, sacrifice, and faithfulness. It was put this way, "God is at work through the everyday actions of faithful people seeking to manifest divine loyalty in their loyal interactions with those around them."<sup>2</sup>

And this becomes the reason that we make commitments to people who can offer us nothing in return. God is at work in us, extending love and grace and sacrifice on our behalves and consequently we are compelled to return the favor. We are compelled to respond and commit to one another because God is committed to us. We know that God has been with us in our own narrow aisles and that God has sent us out to be there with one another in theirs. To hold hands, to dry tears, to sit in silence, to shout with joy, to share in the joys and the sorrows, to be Ruth's to the Naomi's, to be Christ to one another.

The truth is, like Ruth, we often don't have the profound words or the simple answers. The truth is, like Ruth, we are often in the midst of our own grief and struggles and heartaches. The truth is, like Ruth, we often don't have the ability to rectify the wrongs, to straighten the paths, to remove the trees in the driveways. But like Ruth, we can offer ourselves, to stand in solidarity, committing ourselves to walking the narrow aisles with one another.

Maybe someday we will be able to read our scripts and see which lines we missed, which parts we failed to play, whose lead we refused to follow but until then we must try to put away our fears, let down our guards, open our lives and hearts to one another, that we might truly know and show the abundance of God's love and commitment.

All the world's a stage, and you have a major part to play!

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob. *Ruth. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989. Pg. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 16.