



Persistent Women: Ruth

Ruth 4:13-20

Rev. Dr. Emily A. Peck-McClain

Washington Street UMC

October 7, 2018

The Scripture we've just heard is from the very end of the book of Ruth, one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman, and one of my personal favorite books. When I pastored in the local church I always followed the lectionary and almost always preached on the Gospel or Epistle so I think this is the first time I've been able to preach on this favorite. But since we are starting at the end, we need to go back to the beginning so we know where this ending comes from. If you're familiar with the movie *When Harry Met Sally*, you might remember Harry saying, "When I buy a new book, I read the last page first. That way, in case I die before I finish, I know how it ends. That, my friend, is a dark side." I don't think we're embracing our dark side by starting with the ending of Ruth because actually, this ending is also a beginning. This is the essence of our Christian story anyway, isn't it? That endings are actually beginnings?

At any rate, the beginning of Ruth's story takes place in a time of national disaster for Israel. Right before Ruth is the book of Judges and it ends with this verse, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." In addition, there is a famine in Bethlehem where the main characters of Ruth's story live. Naomi is Ruth's mother in law, she, her husband, her two sons, and their wives, Ruth and Orpah, leave Bethlehem and emigrate to Moab, where both Ruth and Orpah are from. There tragedy continues as Naomi's husband and her two sons die. Ruth, Orpah, and their mother in law Naomi are left grief-stricken and strangers in a strange land. They are powerless and left with few options in the patriarchal society of the first century. Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to leave her and return to their own people (whom they left, as was customary at the time, when they married Naomi's sons). Orpah reluctantly does so. Ruth does not. In probably one of the most well-known verses from Ruth, she says to Naomi, "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!" Ruth is determined to stay with Naomi, beyond even "death do us part." Naomi doesn't ask her to leave again; and the two return to Bethlehem broken-hearted but together, at the time of the barley harvest. Ruth persists in staying with Naomi.

When something happens in our house that seems like it can't be "just coincidence" we call it a "God-incidence." This is what happens next in Ruth's story. Naomi is devastated and Ruth gets going. She goes out to glean in order to feed herself and Naomi. This is basically picking the leftovers from the harvest, because leaving something behind in the fields for those who are in need was part of Jewish living at the time as commanded in scripture. In a God-incidence, Ruth gleans in the field belonging to Boaz, a relative of her father-in-law's and someone well respected in the community. Boaz respects Ruth's commitment to her mother-in-law and

offerings her a blessing. He helps her, and Naomi's hope is restored. Ruth persists, through her own grief and devastation, to glean, gathering enough food to feed her and Naomi. Naomi helps Ruth determine the next step in their now shared life. Ruth is bold beyond belief. She follows Naomi's instructions to go to Boaz at night and lie next to him, when he wakes up, obviously surprised to find her there, she basically proposes to him. Do you hear how bold this is?! It's even considered pretty bold now for a woman to propose to a man, isn't it? Ruth does it thousands of years ago. In the Jewish law at the time, Boaz is to marry Ruth because she a widow and he is next of kin. So when Boaz wakes and say, "Who's there?!" She says, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." Spread your cloak over your servant is marry me in first century words. She proposes to him. After some negotiations with someone who actually was a closer kin to her husband than Boaz himself, he says yes to the cloak. Ruth persists past cultural expectations and finds security and a blessing from the community.

And then we come to where our scripture for this morning is located – the last chapter of this short book. Boaz and Ruth marry and Ruth conceives and has a son. Through Ruth's persistence, God's loving kindness is revealed. Through Ruth's persistence hope is found for both her and Naomi. Through Ruth's persistence, we actually get to David, the David who is an ancestor of Joseph, the one who persists past societal expectations of his own time to marry a young pregnant (and not by him) Mary, mother of Jesus. Thank God for Ruth's persistence. Just retelling this story seems like it might be sermon enough, doesn't it? Ruth and Naomi, connected through the pain of grief, together find hope and restoration through Ruth's persistence. This persistence is seemingly passed down through the generations to the man who accompanies Mary through raising God's Son.

The part of the story that I find most exciting through is where I want to spend some more time with you this morning. Not focusing only on these broad strokes of narrative, but getting into the significant details of chapter 4. When the baby is born to Ruth, the women of Bethlehem bless God's holy name, stating what God has done for Naomi, whom they saw marry, emigrate, and return in emptiness. They proclaim who God is – a restorer and nourisher. Naomi has lost her husband and her sons. She gains Ruth and a grandson. Where there was famine, there is now enough barley found from gleaning to sustain her. Where there was loss there is companionship even beyond death. Where there was a broken heart, there is hope. There is a beautiful part of chapter 4 that we just heard that says, "Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse." Although that word translated into "nurse" probably means "caregiver" (I figure she's like grandma daycare to Obed) the early rabbinical interpretation was that this could have been Naomi acting as Obed's wet nurse so it could even be the case that God restores empty breasts with milk to nourish the grandfather of David.

What we see happen through Ruth's persistence is God filling emptiness. Throughout this series on persistent women of the Bible you are hearing about women who are bold and maybe even stubborn. You are hearing about women who do things a little differently (or a lot differently) than was expected, and are found in the pages of our holy scriptures because of it. All these women, and Ruth is certainly one of them, show us that persistence can be a spiritual practice -

way to act in concert with the Holy Spirit, hearing and responding to the presence of God. This is no mere stubbornness or tenacity, right? This isn't being contrary because one doesn't like following rules. This is Holy Stubbornness. Holy Tenacity. Holy Persistence.

As someone who is naturally predisposed to wanting to be both bold and persistent, I think this idea very much. As someone who has also been taught to respect tradition, I also see the risk of this spiritual practice. Holy Persistence changes things. It certainly does for Naomi, and for us, sitting here as faithful Christians who find faith in God through Jesus Christ's who is related, albeit not directly, to Ruth. So what is holy persistence? How do we know if we are participating it?

What we learn from Ruth's story, looking at Ruth's persistence, is that Holy persistence is other-directed, on behalf of those who are in need. Ruth could have returned to her own kin, as Orpah did. There would have been no shame in it, she was already in Moab. Instead, Ruth places herself in a position of also being in need. She partners with Naomi, forever. From that moment when she pledges herself to Naomi everything she does is for their collective survival. Ruth ties her own fate to that of Naomi's. Again turning to the early rabbis who interpreted this scripture, Jews have long held that Ruth shows persistent devotion in the same way that we are expected to have persistent devotion to God. A devotion that cannot be lost and will not be abandoned. Holy persistence is also loving. Ruth is not begrudgingly devoting herself to Naomi's well being. It comes from love of her mother-in-law. It is love that mirrors God's love. Holy persistence is stronger than cultural norms and expectations. Holy persistence is about women who don't "stay in their place" because what society says their place is is not what God says their place is.

Right now it's a hard time to be a woman in our society, especially for those who have lived through sexual assault and harassment. Ruth tells us that holy persistence is companioning with women through this difficult time, when we are processing loss and are grieved. Ruth tells us that holy persistence is doing so out of love for these women who are in your lives. Ruth tells us that holy persistence is doing so even though it might be hard and even though it won't be popular. God surely inspires and makes good use of Ruth's tenacity and boldness. May God do the same with us – encourage persistence and inspire its use on behalf of love for those who are broken-hearted. Let it be so, Amen.

Resources

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2123

<https://reformjudaism.org/book-ruth>