

Ruth 1:1-22

“I’ve Been meaning to ask... where do we go from here?”

4th of 4-part Series: “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask... a series for curiosity, courage, & connection”ⁱ

June 27, 2021 ~ 5th Sunday after Pentecost ~ Installation of Deacons

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Introduction to Scripture:

The conviction that lies underneath this four-week series, is that courageous conversations begin with simple questions, with the curiosity to truly listen. Radio host Celeste Headley, begins her Ted Talk titled, “10 ways to have a better conversation” with the fact that we are more polarized than ever before—and this was in 2016! Why? We are not listening to each other. That’s not the only reason, but it is one we can agree on, and one we can do something about. A third of American teenagers send about a hundred texts a day, according to Pew Research; and they are more likely to text a friend than talk to them face-to-face. It’s not just teens, it seems that “conversational competence” is the single most overlooked skill in the 21st century. Hopefully this sermon series has been helping us to consider and further develop this skill that is at the heart of our faith. I would call deep listening that leads to courageous conversations a spiritual practice.

Each week we have considered one simple question that can begin a courageous conversation. Today’s story in the first chapter of Ruth encompasses all three questions we have looked at so far: “Where are you from?” Where Ruth and Naomi are from is significant: They are not from the same place, they are from different places and peoples: Bethlehem and Moab. Yet, that boundary is crossed for the good of all. Second question: “Where does it hurt?” Naomi hurts *everywhere*. She has hurt so much for so long; her hurt has become part of her identity to the point where she even changes her name.

Third question from last week: “What do you need?” Although it seems as though Naomi wants to be alone, further isolation is *not* really what she needs, so Ruth refuses. And it also encompasses our final question, “where do we go from here?” In this first chapter, Naomi and Ruth experience severe loss, famine, and emptiness. Yet in the final verse, note the hint of a turn, a new start, a subtle shift toward fullness: the beginning of the barley harvest. Could it lead to joy unspeakable in a future no one can see?

Sermon:

Three broken hearts, three collapsed lives, all with the same question in their hearts, if not on their lips: “Where do we go from here?” Naomi has been sucked dry, forced to live in a foreign country, first losing her husband and then her two grown, able-bodied sons all gone within ten years, and no grandchildren. No future next generation, just two Moabite, foreign daughters-in-law. She had a thousand reasons to feel bitter and hopeless. To the question, “Where do we go from here?” Naomi decides to retreat to the land of Judah, her homeland. Time to make a clean break and go back to the scene of her earlier childhood, back before her life fell apart. She’d heard there was even food in Bethlehem again, so no reason to mope

around in Moab. Better to mope around in Bethlehem. But she still had the messy business of those two pitiful daughters-in-law. Best to cut them loose.

Orpah takes Naomi's advice and after her first, obligatory and polite, "Oh, no, I couldn't possibly leave you at a time like this," did do as her mother-in-law told them to. Naomi had given them very practical reasons to part company with her at this point: a couple of little things like financial security and the possibility of remarrying and still having children. Naomi was actually releasing them of any sense of obligation or duty to take care of her. A gift, in a way. And Orpah took the gift, and made her exit.

Ruth, took her cue from a different voice, one deep inside of her. Somehow Ruth already had learned to trust that inner voice of Divine Love. And that voice rose up in Ruth to say, "no" to Naomi's direction. In the poetic King James, it is translated: "*Entreat me not to leave you or to turn back from following you.*" Orpah and Ruth faced with the same situation, Ruth refuses to take Naomi's advice. Instead of retreating to a safe past, jumps forward with a giant leap of faith, pledging her loyalty not only to Naomi, but to Naomi's God—forsaking her Moabite god for the God of Naomi, the God of Israel. Our awesome God.

We can't say for sure, but perhaps Ruth had what is called "internal freedom." That is, she was able to find the genuine, the true voice of God within her. The gift of internal freedom is hope in the better that lies ahead. A stunning example of a person whose "internal freedom" literally freed her and 70 other enslaved people was Underground Railroad Conductor, Harriet Tubman. A quotation from Harriet Tubman reads, "If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. If there's shouting after you, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going." Harriet acted in spite of the consequences because she had found that place of freedom inside herself.ⁱⁱ Was Harriet Tubman channeling Ruth, the Moabite? It seems that Ruth, back in the time when the judges ruled about 1200 years before Christ, has something to teach us about "internal freedom."

As the story progresses in the next three chapters, we see Ruth gleaning the fields tirelessly, providing food for Naomi, calling upon Boaz, Naomi's kinsman, to fulfill his next of kin responsibilities. In due time Ruth has a son by Boaz, named Obed, whom she gives to to Naomi. The full story discloses that Ruth's stirring oath was not just inspired by some fleeting passion of the moment, but something deeper. Ruth had found her internal freedom that forged an unexpected path forward into a new life beyond what she could see.

It's amazing how Ruth's conversion and conviction turns the story on multiple levels. It goes from a story of sickness, death, bitterness, randomness, social and economic disorder—to one of life health, fullness, purpose and order. On the most basic physical level, they go from hunger and famine to fullness and a harvest of bounty. As a family, they go from the threat of a broken line without an heir, to continuation in the union with Boaz. From a string of random misfortunes their lives become animated by providential intervention. At a political level, we see the Israelites moving from being a people with no leader to the promise of a future king, when Obed, is born to Ruth and Boaz. Obed who will become the grandfather of King David. Yes, the

union of a foreign, faithful Moabite woman to Obed, forges a future King David, who leads to the King of Kings, our Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.

How can this story speak to us and all those tricky feelings we are having right now? When we shudder at the unfolding tragedy of the deadly collapse of the high-rise condo in Surfside, Florida on Thursday; or the COVID deaths that continue to plague India and Brazil and other countries worldwide because of vaccination and treatment inequity; or the ways we continue to disguise the collective wounds of our structural racism instead of treating or healing them; or the historical and current upswing in our national sin of voter suppression; or the accelerating death spiral of our planet's ecosystem: any one of these could tempt us to give up hope. But then there's Ruth. And there's God who raised Jesus from the dead. God, who says from Genesis to Revelation: *You are loved. You are unique. You are free. You are on the way. You are going somewhere. Your life has meaning.*ⁱⁱⁱ Like Ruth, God has planted hope deep inside of us. Even when we are not feeling it.

Courageous conversations can help us access that shift toward hope. They can help us listen to that "internal freedom" that God gifts us with. They begin with a simple question and the curiosity to truly listen. We are going to try a mini-version of this right now. The simple question is this: *"What gives you hope right now?"* Just for 60 seconds, let's try conversing with a person we are sitting next to, or near us. First step: find your person...The simple question is this: *What gives you hope right now?* One person talks, the other listens. After 60 seconds, I will signal you to reverse roles. *What gives you hope right now?"*

Let's close with words from Barbara Holmes, spiritual teacher, activist, writer, theologian:

*Joy unspeakable
erupts when you least expect it,
when the burden is greatest,
when the hope is gone
after bullets fly.
It rises on the crest of impossibility,
It sways to the rhythm
of steadfast hearts,
and celebrates
What we cannot see.*^{iv}

ⁱ This sermon series idea was created by Sanctifiedart.org, Founding Creative Director, The Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity.

ⁱⁱ Amy Frykholm, "Breathe, Pray, Act," interview of Therese Tylor-Stinson, *Christian Century*, June 2, 2021, p. 11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Rohr, "The Call: Introduction to the Word," *The Great themes of Scripture*, tape 1 (St. Anthony Messenger Tapes: 1973).

^{iv} Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Fortress Press, 2017 and 2004).