

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 2, 2026
9:30 AM

Text: Ruth 1

Theme: Ruth: Loss and Loyalty

[prayer]

This month we will be spending time with the Book of Ruth – a book that begins with famine and ends with a barley harvest. It is an appropriate story to read in August when the wheat fields are ripening, and vegetable gardens are yielding up their summer bounty.

It is also an appropriate story to read when calamity strikes. I spent yesterday on my phone watching the evacuation zones for the Spokane fires expand into familiar and beloved neighborhoods from my childhood. One short video clip showed a house on fire; I recognized it from dozens of visits to my grandparents' home. Another showed the location where my high school used to play football games, also in flames. I suspect that a favorite spot in Riverside State Park has also burned. The fires have jumped well-traveled roads and the winding river that map the landscape of more than twenty years of my life. The church where I grew up was forced to cancel worship; many members of the congregation, including the pastor, are under evacuation orders.

My ninety-two-year-old grandfather, who lives alone in the Indian Trail neighborhood, made it out safely. So, I am thanking God even as I grieve for those familiar places and for the people who woke up this morning not knowing if they have a home to return to.

[pause]

Naomi does not praise God in her grief. Naomi, whose name means "sweet," opens her mouth in bitter lamentation. She accuses God of forsaking her, of piling calamity upon calamity. The Book of Ruth takes place in the time of the judges, a

period of anarchy and violence in Judah. Layered on top of this political calamity was an environmental calamity – a famine. Bethlehem means “House of Bread,” but there was no bread, and so Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons packed up their worldly belongings and migrated to Moab.

Moab was Judah’s political enemy. It was a place the people of God were supposed to avoid. And yet it was Moabites who welcomed Elimelech and fed his family, and Moab where they made a new home, and his sons found wives: Orpah and Ruth. At its roots the Book of Ruth is about how God chooses to act through the very people we are told to fear and despise.

Sadly, while Elimelech and his family found refuge in Moab, tragedy eventually caught up with them. After he died, and then their sons died, Naomi is left a widow in a foreign land with two young, widowed daughters-in-law to look after. With no family to support her, she is in a precarious position. Hearing that the famine had ended in Judah, she decides to return to Bethlehem. But she holds little hope for her future there. And so, she tells Orpah and Ruth to remain in Moab, to return to their mother’s homes with the expectation that they are still young and fertile enough to find new husbands.

We should not judge Naomi for her bitterness. Few things are more tiresome than telling someone who is suffering that they should count their blessings. God does not condemn our grief. I like what Philip Yancey writes in his book *Disappointment with God*:

“You can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment—he can absorb them all...Spiritual giants of the Bible are shown contending with God. They prefer to go away limping, like Jacob, rather than to shut God out. In this respect, the Bible prefigures a tenet of modern psychology: you can’t really deny your feelings or make them disappear, so you might as well express them. God can deal with every human response save one. He cannot abide the response [we] fall back on instinctively: an attempt to ignore him or treat him as though he does not exist.”

Naomi does not give into that temptation; she does not treat God as if He doesn't exist. She throws at Him her grief, her bitterness, her disappointment. And how does God respond? He responds by giving Naomi Ruth.

While Orpah obeys her mother-in-law's admonition to go home, Ruth is indignant at the idea. She obstinately "clings" to Naomi. That word "clings" is the same word used in Genesis 2:24: "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh" (NRSVUE). Just as a marriage creates a new family, Ruth decides to create a new family with Naomi. She demonstrates the same kind of faithfulness to Naomi that partners in marriage vow to demonstrate:

Wherever you go, I will go.

Wherever you stay, I will stay.

Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.

Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.

May the Lord do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you.

(vv. 16-17 CEB)

Ruth's choice constitutes the breaking of her former family bonds and the bridging of her life with Naomi's. Turning your back on your tribe and on your god was simply not done. And yet this is exactly what Ruth does. She declares her commitment to Naomi's God and Naomi's people. She does this knowing that when she arrives in Bethlehem at Naomi's side, she will face a language barrier, a social barrier, and a religious barrier. She will be "that Moabite woman" – forced to glean her food from the edges of society.

And yet, "that Moabite woman" – this foreign "other" – becomes the foremother of Jesus – the same Jesus who teaches us to let go of all earthly attachments and cling to him.

In her grief and despair over her future, Naomi tries to push away the only two people who remain to her. I think we can all identify with that impulse. Wounded animals hide. When we are hurting, we push people away because the animal instinct inside us tells us to hide, too.

Orpah is respectful and obedient. She walks away because Naomi tells her to. But Ruth, whose name means “friend,” is stubborn. Naomi’s grief doesn’t deter Ruth. She keeps moving toward Naomi, because Ruth knows that Naomi needs her, and she needs Naomi. They are better together.

Ruth demonstrates an extra measure of faithfulness, what the Hebrew writers call *hesed*. The technical translation is “kindness” but that doesn’t quite capture the fullness of Ruth’s action. *Hesed* is part of the essential nature of God. God’s faithfulness is steadfast, even stubborn. God does not turn His back on us. God does not let us walk alone. God clings to us to us in the muck and mud of life, sharing human flesh, sharing human experience. God bridges the greatest difference there is – the divide between the human and the divine.

The Incarnation is all about God’s *hesed* that was so steadfast, so stubborn that God went to the lengths of becoming one of us. As Jesus walked and taught and lived and died and was resurrected among us, he demonstrated the strength of connection over isolation. Even Jesus didn’t go alone. He took the Twelve with him. Was their fellowship perfect? No. But it was persistent.

Life is hard. God knows this. This is why God has given us to each other. “Two are better than one...If either should fall, one can pick up the other” (Eccl 4:9-10).

I don’t want to be part of a church that perpetuates the American idolatry of rugged individualism. I want to be part of a church that models interdependence, that leans into brave and vulnerable community – the kind that rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep and bears each other’s burdens. I want to be part of a church where we tenaciously cling to each other as God clings to us because we believe we are better together. I want to be part of a church that keeps the vows it takes when we receive new members into our fold: To pray for each other, to forgive each other, to nurture and encourage each other as we walk the Way of Jesus.

Like Jesus, Ruth embodies the strength of connection over isolation. She embodies our shared ministry of accompaniment. We are all called to that ministry. We are all called to show *hesed* to each other, to give the extra measure of faithfulness and sacrificial love, to be the presence of God to each other in the low places of life, to never let each other go alone.

As some of our neighbors grieve this morning, spread across this beautiful but sometimes treacherous region we call the Inland Northwest, I am recalling the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount: “Happy are people who grieve, for they will be made glad” (Matt 5:4 CEB). Jesus tells us they are happy or blessed *when* they grieve. Why? Because they *will* be made glad. Not because God erases the grief. But because God redeems it. And He uses us, the community, to do the redeeming.

Thanks be to God. Amen.