



From the Pulpit: June 4, 2023

Trinity Sunday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Ruth 1

This summer Katie, Christine, and I are preaching a sermon series about the two tiny books in the Hebrew Bible, Ruth and Jonah. People skip them, or ignore them, but they're very important to the Hebrew Bible. We're calling this sermon series *Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible*. We'll tell you what we mean by that as we go along.

Ruth One is the same passage we looked at last week so I won't read the entire text again—I just want to focus on a couple of verses—I won't re-read it for you, but I will remind you what we learned last week about Ruth and Naomi.

Naomi is a 40-year-old Hebrew woman from Bethlehem who has been living in the foreign land of Moab for ten years. During that decade Naomi experiences many beautiful and terrible things. Her teenage boys grow up and marry Moabite women, but then also in that decade her husband and both sons die. The sons are not yet 30 years old.

With no husband and no children in the house, Naomi decides to go back home to Bethlehem, and her two Moabite daughters-in-law insist on coming with her. Naomi forbids them because Jews and Moabites hate each other and the two young, 24-year-old, childless, widowed Moabite women are likely to live a hard, lonely, and friendless existence in Judea.

Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible, II: Loyalty

One daughter-in-law finds this to be sensible advice and goes back to her own Moabite mother.

But Ruth, the other 24-year-old, childless, widowed Moabite woman speaks those ancient, timeless, precious words you hear at weddings all the time:

“Entreat me not to leave you,
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,
and there will I be buried.”

“Entreat me not to leave you,
to turn back from
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Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will
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and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die,
and there will I be buried.”

Bam! Exclamation Point! Argument Over! Ruth walks the hundred miles to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, lives the rest of her life in this alien land, and through some shrewd intrigues that we'll learn about in coming weeks, gives the childless, widowed Naomi a flourishing future.

Now, why do we commonly speak these words from a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law at weddings? Are we encouraging new husbands and new wives to get close to their in-laws, which of course is often a famously fraught relationship?

No, we are celebrating the initiation of an unbreakable, lifelong covenant between two people, because when one person pledges her everlasting troth to another—be it husband to wife, mother to daughter, friend to friend, or brother to brother—when one person pledges her everlasting troth to another, she is giving away life’s greatest gift. She is giving away all she has to give.

We all need at least one person who will walk a hundred miles with us across an almost impermeable border into an alien land, because the days are hard and the nights are long and life can be very arduous and very lonely. Naomi had nothing—no husband, no children, no food, no job, no visible means of support. Naomi had nothing. But she had **Ruth**.

If you are married, I hope that companion is your spouse. If you are not, find someone willing to walk the way with you, find someone who will say, “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, and there will I be buried.

Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Crossroads* is about Russ Hildebrandt, a youth minister at a mainline Protestant church in suburban Chicago. It could have been set at Kenilworth Union Church. There were times where I thought Mr. Franzen was reading my mail or planting a hidden camera at our IMPACT meetings.

Russ is a troubled and unhappy youth minister; he’s the anti-Squire. His children are a mess. He does not love his wife and his wife does not love him.

At one point he admits that “his marriage was a miserable thing, held together by habit and vow and duty.”¹ That is not a situation devoutly to be wished, but there is something virtuous about a marriage that endures because of habit, vow, and duty, even if it is an unhappy one.

¹Jonathan Franzen, *Crossroads* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2021), 195.

Do you remember how the hobbits Merry and Pippin put it to Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Frodo and Samwise Gamgee are about to embark on that harrowing journey across desolate wastelands to drop the One Ring into the fires of Mordor?

Merry says, “You can trust us to stick with you through thick and thin—to the bitter end. And you can trust us to keep any secret of yours...But you cannot trust

us to let you face trouble alone, and go off without a word. We are your friends, Frodo.”²

That kind of constancy across a lifetime, that kind of sameness across the days and weeks and months and years and decades and generations, is integral to human flourishing.

Kathy and I had dinner recently with our friends Meg and Mike and Maria and Scott. The conversation was lively. We were sharing the books and films and TV shows we appreciate, and someone threw a provocative conversation starter in the middle of the table: “What’s the single finest hour of television you’ve ever seen?” That got us going. One of us said that it was an episode of Pamela Adlon’s Fx show *Better Things*, about a quirky family of women and girls.

What would **you** say? Tough question. TV has been so good for so long, it’s an embarrassment of riches. It’s television that teaches us the story of our own lives. How do you choose a single hour? What would you say? *MASH*? *Cheers*? *Seinfeld*? *Veep*? *Band of Brothers*?

In my mind, at least one of the greatest hours of television I’ve ever seen was an episode of the Netflix show *Derek*.

²J.R.R. Tolkien, fifth chapter of the first book (“A Conspiracy Unmasked”) in *The Fellowship of the Rings*.

“when one person pledges her everlasting troth to another, she is giving away life’s greatest gift.”

In the show *Derek*, Ricky Gervais plays the titular character, a mentally challenged 50-year-old who lives and works at a nursing home in a small English seaside town. It's a small, quiet show. *Derek* is the anti-*Succession*, or the anti-*Game of Thrones*.

Derek is not very smart. He has all these odd idiosyncrasies and tics, but he is "an Israelite in whom there is no guile," as Jesus might have put it. He is so full of kindness and grace that everybody in that tiny nursing home strives to be like him.

And my favorite episode is about a resident at Derek's nursing home called Lizzie. Lizzie is ancient and has Alzheimer's. Her memory deteriorates a little bit every day.

Her husband Gerald visits her every day, all day, even though most of the time she does not know who he is. To her, Gerald is her favorite caretaker.

Gerald says, "When Lizzie was 20, she worked in a shoe shop in London. When I walked in the first time, I thought she was the prettiest thing I'd ever seen. The next week, when I went in to buy my third pair of shoes, I asked her out. We were married a year later.

"She doesn't know me every day, but I live to see her every day. She's still the same person. I introduce myself, and we get to know each other all over again. I'm lucky. Who else gets to fall in love 365 times a year?"

"People see a couple of doddering old fools caught in a time warp, waiting to die. But I see a beautiful young girl from Dublin who wants to spend the rest of her life with me. I win. Don't feel sorry for me, or Lizzie. We had the best life we could ever have had, because we spent it together."³

"Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried."

Ruth is one of the most winsome characters in the whole sprawling saga of God's history with God's people. Once she fancies you, she will never let go, no matter how many husbands die, no matter how many desolate miles she has to walk across the barren desert, no matter how many rigid borders she has to violate to be with you. We all need someone like that.

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³Ricky Gervais wrote the Netflix show *Derek* and plays the title character. This is Season 1, Episode 7.

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

O Incarnate Word,
Ancient of Days,
Lord God of Mercy and Might.

O Sovereign Source of All Things,
O Rock, Cloud, Fortress and Fountain,
let your word and wisdom
echo off the walls of this sanctuary
and into our sacred chapel of our hearts.

Let your spirit of stillness
and the storm of your justice
sweep across our lives.

As we fold our hands in prayer again,
we are amazed at what these hands have carried,
week after week,
year after year.

These hands offer up to you praise.
These hands offer up to you the things they've carried.
These hands offer up to you the cares of the world.
These hands offer up to you the tenderness
of caring for another.

These hands have held and now hold so much.
Hear our prayer as we hand over to you
the weight of what we carry
so that you might bear with us the burden,
the worry
and even the delight and joy and awe and wonder
of this life.

We give you thanks for the muffle and hush of morning,
for the hum of the wind and the song of the bird.

For the simplicity of bread to eat
and clean water to drink.

For the transatlantic journey of coffee and rice
to our cup and bowl.

For the treasure of clean air to breathe
and a gentle place to rest at night.

We give you thanks for babies baptized,
and young people affirming
the presence of God in their lives.
We give you thanks for the freedom to worship
and the friendship found in this place.

We pray for the worries of the world. For the fires across
Canada,
may the flames be contained and dampened.

For the ongoing violence in places across the world:
Ukraine, Russia, Israel, Palestine, and Sudan.

For the places where prejudice grows
and lives feel under threat.

Let love lead the way. Let justice win.

Let there be freedom to love,
freedom to be,
freedom to walk this earth in peace.

For those in our midst
who were surprised by sorrow this week,
we offer our hearts to you.

We think of the French family and the Kerr family and
others for whom grief has drawn near.

Hold our prayers, O God.

Hold our prayers in the palm of your hand.
And hear us as we lift our voices
with tenderness in the prayer Christ teaches us,
saying:

Our Father...Amen.

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