



From the Pulpit: May 28, 2023

Pentecost Sunday—Communion—Memorial Day

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Ruth 1:1–17

This summer Katie, Christine, and I are preaching this sermon series about two small books in the Hebrew Bible: Ruth and Jonah, which have a common theme. We're calling this series *Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible*. As we go along we'll tell you what we mean by that. First we will start with *The Book of Ruth*. I'm reading from Chapter One and read through verse 17 because these are some of the most beloved words in scripture.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

"A Jew in Moab or
a Moabite in Judea
is to be as alien as
alien can get."

Two Minority Reports from the Hebrew Bible, I: Grief

Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, "Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said,

"Do not press me 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. May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

A woman named Naomi and her husband Elimelech are living in Bethlehem about a thousand years before Jesus when a famine strikes the land. They hear that there is food in the adjacent land of Moab, so they take their two teenage sons and migrate there. It's only 40 miles as the crow flies, but the Dead Sea lies between, so they walk a hundred miles, takes about a week.

They go there even though Judea and Moab hate each other. I know that's a strong world but I use it intentionally. Judea and Moab hate each other. A Jew in Moab or a Moabite in Judea is to be as alien as alien can get. I pointed this out in a Bible study the other day, and Mark Fuller said, "You mean it'd be like a Packer fan at Soldier Field." I wasn't exactly thinking in those terms, but I guess that about captures it.

Naomi and Elimelech and their two sons make a living in Moab as immigrants. The sons grow up and marry Moabite wives. They live there for ten years. All the men die—Naomi’s husband but also, more terribly, both of Naomi’s sons, who aren’t even 30 years old yet.

After Naomi has been in Moab for ten years—she’s now about 40 years old and her Moabite daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah are 24—after Naomi’s been there for ten years, famine now strikes Moab. Naomi hears there’s food back home in Bethlehem, so she decides to go back. She never liked Moab anyway, doesn’t speak the language, has no friends, and is utterly alone except for her daughters-in-law, a widowed and childless woman with nothing and no one but a broken heart.

Naturally Naomi expects to go home alone, but her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah insist on joining her in Bethlehem. Naomi says, “No way! You don’t want to be a 24-year-old childless, widowed Moabite woman in Bethlehem. You won’t speak the language, you’ll have no friends, and they’ll all hate you.”

Orpah is a reasonable woman; this all makes sense to her, so she stays in Moab, but Ruth speaks those ancient, timeless, precious words you hear at weddings: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.”

Wow. Ruth is only 24, but she is wise beyond her years. She knows that these two widowed, childless women are going to need each other now more than ever, so she decides to stick closer to Naomi than a golden retriever, because grief is one of the loneliest places on earth. No one understands exactly what you’re going through. They don’t know what to say, because there are no words, and people are always saying the wrong thing.

Grief is not only dreadful and confusing; it’s also universal. We will all go through it at some point in our lives. We will either **cause** it or **suffer** it, probably both, before we die.

You know who Amanda Gorman is—right?—the inaugural poet? She published her poem *The Hill We Climb* as a book. A school district in Florida banned it from their elementary school library. That poem is nothing but an extensive, poignant, eloquent paean to the glory of America’s past and the hope of its future. One extremely unpatriotic parent complained, so it’s gone.

Anyway elsewhere Amanda says, “Grief is the grenade that always goes off.”¹ Yes? It always goes off. Someone else put it like this: “Death is not a glitch in the human operating system. It’s part of the program; it’s a feature. It’s the only prediction we can make at birth that we can truly bank on. Everyone will die, and it’s very likely that someone we love will die before we do. And yet the bereaved are often treated like something disgraceful or unnatural has happened to them. People avoid them and fall silent when they enter the room. And this happens just when they most need companionship.”²

“Ruth speaks those ancient, timeless, precious words you hear at weddings: “Where you go, I will go...”

When Ruth followed Naomi to Bethlehem, she was making herself an alien in a foreign land. She won’t have any friends; everybody will hate her because she’s from Moab. She doesn’t speak the language.

Obviously, in the past decade Ruth and Naomi have figured out a way to communicate with each other, probably in a patois of Hebrew and Arabic, but Ruth doesn’t speak Bethlehem’s language. She goes anyway, because she shares Naomi’s plight. She is one of the few who know precisely what Naomi is going through because she is a childless widow herself. She makes good use of her terrible grief.

Do the same for someone in your life who’s stricken. You’ve been through stuff. You’ve been through terrible stuff: Put it to good use. But be warned, if you walk with the broken-hearted, you will be walking into a foreign land. You will not speak the language. Literally.

¹Amanda Gorman, *Call Us What We Carry* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021), p. 78.

²Adapted from Belinda Luscombe, “Life After Death,” *Time*, April 24, 2017.

You will not speak the language. Because sometimes there are no words. You will either use the wrong words, or you will speak them in a thick, almost incomprehensible, accent.

But that's okay. Sometimes you don't need words. Leave a tater tot casserole on the front porch, ring the doorbell, and leave. Send her a Lettuce-Entertain-You gift card. Mow the lawn, or send your gardener. Clean the house, or send your housekeeper. Take the kids to the zoo.

The purgatory of bereavement is universal. We may as well get good at dealing with it. Because everybody grieves. Even dogs.

This holiday weekend I'm thinking about the particular, intense sorrow we experience at the loss of our fallen heroes.

In December 2010, U.S. Marine Pfc. Colton W. Rusk was killed by a sniper in Helmand, Afghanistan. He was 20 years old. Private Rusk was a machine gunner and dog handler.

Bomb-sniffing dogs are precious to the Marines. It can cost \$40,000 to train a single dog. They're so precious they wear body armor. The Marines learn dog anatomy so that they can properly treat the wounds of an injured dog.

Many companies use German Shepherds or Malinois, but Private Rusk's company used Labrador retrievers. Colton's dog was a three-year-old black lab named Eli. In a futile effort to protect Colton, Eli climbed on top of him when he fell. In Colton's obituary, do you know who was first on his list of survivors? Eli.

Because it can cost \$40,000 to train a bomb-sniffing dog, they don't retire till they're eight or nine, but when Colton died, Eli retired at the age of three. They sent him back to Texas to live with Colton's mom and dad. The instant Eli arrived at the Rusk home, he sniffed around for about four seconds, hustled straight to Colton's room, and jumped on the bed and stayed there. He is a great comfort to Colton's grieving parents.³

³Elisabeth Bumiller, "The Dogs of War: Beloved Comrades in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, May 11, 2011.

Maybe some of you have read the books or blogs of Glennon Doyle. Sometimes her books land on *The Times* best-seller list. Glennon's sister Amanda was just crushed by her divorce at a young age and didn't have a place to live so she moved into Glennon's basement. Amanda wanted that spare room to stay as unadorned as possible so she wouldn't be tempted to stay there long. All she put on the walls was a small cross with a Bible verse from Jeremiah on it: "For I know the plans I have for you. Plans to give you hope and a future."

Every evening, Amanda would come home from work, eat dinner, go straight down to her basement room by herself, and stay there. One evening Glennon followed her down there and was about to knock on the door when she heard her sister weeping quietly inside.

Glennon says, "That is when I realized that where **she** was, **I** could not go. Grief is a lonely basement room. No one can join you there."

So instead of knocking on the door, Glennon sits down on the basement floor with her back to the closed door, to keep vigil, to guard her process. She stayed there for hours. And then she repeated that vigil every night for a very long time. No words, just a silent vigil. Every night.

Amanda stayed in that basement for a year, then moved out, got a new job, married a beautiful man, and started a family.

Glennon says, "That small, dark room was like a cocoon. All that time, she was undergoing a complete metamorphosis. Grief is a cocoon from which we emerge anew."⁴ Yes? You will emerge anew.

It helps to have a sister sitting on the basement floor keeping vigil with you, with her back against the closed door. Or a daughter-in-law like Ruth, walking with you every step of the way into a foreign land.

⁴Adapted from Glennon Doyle, *Untamed* (New York: Dial Press, 2020), pp. 270-271.

"be warned, if
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—The Great Prayer—
The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

You are our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help
in these days overflowing with blossom and green.
The earth reaches out to us in stillness
as sunrise mingles with the expectations of the day,
our bodies rise awake and open
to the possibility of your spirit in our midst.

Let us approach you in humility,
offering ourselves to you,
shedding the world's lessons
of selfish ambition and vain conceit,
and instead let us stand firm in the blessing
of gentleness, mercy, patience,
and compassion, serving one another in love.

On this Memorial Day weekend,
shower us with your teachings,
reminding us again
that greater love has no one than this:
to lay down one's life for one's friends.

As we linger with the sound
of birdsong,
trains whistling in the distance,
whispers across the pews signaling peace,
let us not take for granted
the holy hum of this life we live.

Let us greet one another
with the hello, shalom, buon giorno,
namaste, buenos dias of peace,
in the language of our mother tongue,
speaking in one voice
the possibility of life without prejudice,
without war. (adapted from Richard Blanco: "One Today")

For those today
who face the impossibilities of such conflict,
of violence, of confrontation and hostility,
let there be a way through.

Give this day just enough peace across the globe
for one more son-turned-soldier to return to his mother.

Though we walk through the valley of shadow,
let us fear no evil, for you are with us.

Help us,
global citizens bound together by the common life,
to sink down into Jesus' vision
for peace and amity, dignity, and wellbeing.

Like a pebble that falls into a lake,
ripples slowly spreading,
let our own actions of goodwill and nonviolence
shift and change this world for the better.

Shelter and protect us, O God.
Shed your grace.
Bind us together.
And hold the sacred prayers we carry
to you this day, in faith and in silence.

And now we ask pour out
your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon these your gifts of bread and cup,
that the bread we break
and the cup we bless
may be the communion
of the body and blood of Christ.

By your Spirit make us one with Christ
that we may be one with all who share this feast,
united in ministry in every place.

As this bread is Christ's body for us,
send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.

And hear us as we pray the prayer Jesus teaches us saying:
Our Father...Amen.

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