

## I

The first Thanksgiving after Amy and I were married, we visited with my mother's side of the family. We were sitting around the table visiting with two of my uncles, and I asked them how you'll know when you stop being a newlywed. One uncle sidled up next to his wife, put his arm around her, and said in a syrupy voice, "Oh, you never stop being a newlywed." But his brother, looked at us and said, "Trust me, you'll know."

## II

Whenever I'm invited by a couple to officiate their wedding service, we always spend some time together before the service talking about what it means to make the covenant of Christian marriage together. We spend some time talking about family relationships, because a marriage creates new relationships – not just between the couple – but between their families, too.

And we all know that family relationships that are created by marriage can sometimes be complicated, messy, even painful. But they can also be beautiful, life-giving, even holy. And such is the case with the story before us today.

## III

This Fall, we're reading and preaching our way through some of the major stories of the Hebrew Scriptures,

also called the Old Testament.

In between where we left off last week and where we pick up the story this week, after 400 years of living as refugees and then as slaves in the Land of Egypt, the people of God have finally returned to the Land of Promise, with each of the 12 tribes of Israel going to their ancestral homeland.

However, God's people were not anything resembling a unified nation. There was no capital city, no centralized political leadership. Each of the 12 tribes did its own thing, and whenever disputes arose within or between the tribes, they appointed judges to settle things.

And so this time period in the biblical story is called the time of the Judges, and it was one marked by violence and political and economic instability, as the people depended on good crops for their survival.

But our story today does not focus on a military leader or economist or politician or legal mind. This is a domestic story about everyday people facing everyday problems. And in this story, God gets mentioned in passing by the characters, but God gets no speaking lines. In order to see God at work in this everyday story, we have to read between the lines.

At the center of our story today is a woman by the name of Ruth, her mother-in-law named Naomi, and her

sister-in-law named Orpah.

So I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Ruth 1:1-17.

*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. The Lord grant that you may find security, each*

*of you in the house of your husband." 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, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

*So she said, "See, 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  
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!"*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

And so there are these three bereaved women. Naomi, a woman of Judah, bereft of her husband and sons. Ruth and Orpah, Moabite women, bereft of their husbands. All three of them full of grief, all three of them so very vulnerable.

Naomi decided that there was nothing left for her in Moab except for the graves of her husband and sons, and there was nothing else left to do but head back to her ancestral homeland, back to the little village of Bethlehem, which, not for nothing, in Hebrew means, "House of Bread."

And as she started for home her two daughters-in-law began to go with her. But when Naomi saw that they meant to come with her, with tears in her eyes, she told them to go back to their own hometowns.

And, being the dutiful daughters-in-law that they were, at first, they refused. But Naomi spelled it out for them. There was very little hope for them in Bethlehem. As far as Naomi could see, the best option among bad choices was for them to all go their separate ways - Orpah and Ruth to Moab, and Naomi to Judah. The best option that Naomi could see was for all of them to start over.

And so these three widows hugged each other and cried together.

And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and went home. And as far as we can tell from the text, there's no shame or judgment in that. As far as we know, Orpah went home and started over, and for all we know, she lived happily ever after.

But not Ruth. Ruth responded to her mother-in-law with some of the most beautiful words of commitment found in the entire Bible, words that are often repeated at weddings because they are so strong and powerful.

Ruth said to her mother-in-law, "Do not press me to leave 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 I will be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you."

Ruth had to have known that staying with Naomi meant that she would become a stranger in a strange land. She had to have known that staying with Naomi meant that much about her own identity and concept of her place in the world, including her own understanding of the very nature of the divine, would be up for renegotiation. Ruth had to have known that staying with Naomi would mean starting over in so many ways. But she also knew that staying with Naomi meant that she wouldn't start over alone.

When presented with a choice,

Ruth chose relationship over security. When presented with a choice, Ruth chose relationship over culture. When presented with a choice, Ruth chose relationship over everything else.

Within the biblical book of Ruth, God has no speaking lines. In fact, other than an oblique reference here and there, God barely gets mentioned at all. The Book of Ruth is far more focused on the horizontal relationships between people than it is on the vertical relationships with God.

But that doesn't mean that God is not involved in this story. In fact, here's a spoiler alert - Ruth will indeed find a new husband in Bethlehem by the name of Boaz, and Ruth and Boaz will have a grandson named David, who, among other things, will be remembered in the biblical story as the king who was so committed to understanding and nurturing relationships that he finally united the disjointed tribes of Israel into one unified nation.

And according to Matthew's gospel, fourteen generations after David, a man named Joseph, and a young woman named Mary will welcome a baby boy and wrap him in swaddling clothes and lay him in a manger right there in that very same little town of Bethlehem. And Mary and Joseph will name this newborn baby boy Jesus, which means he saves his people from their sins.

And when Matthew sits down to

give an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, guess which Moabite great-grandmother will get mentioned specifically by name?

#### IV

My friend, the older I get, the less certain I am about things than I was when I was a younger man. Perhaps you're the same way.

But I am certain that one day, the last breath will leave these lungs of mine, and I will die. Of that I am certain.

And here's what I believe in my heart of hearts. When I die, I'm going to stand before the throne of God, and together, God and I are going to review the course of my life.

But I don't think that God will be terribly interested in my accomplishments. I don't think God will be terribly interested in what I was able to produce or accumulate in my lifetime.

I think what God will be most interested in is what I did or did not do with the relationships that God entrusted to my care. How did I do as a son, as a husband, as a father, as a friend? When faced with a choice between relationship and security or culture or convenience, what did I prioritize?

I am not certain of many things, but I am certain of this. One day, I hope

many years from now, the air will leave your lungs for the last time, and you, too, will die. And I do believe that you, too, will stand with God and together you will review the course of your life.

And I think God will be interested to know a few things. Did you do justice? That is, did you try your very best to live in right relationship with God, and in right relationship with your neighbors? Did you love kindness? Not for nothing, the word kind and the word kin come from the same root. Did you treat others, even if they came from a different culture, even if they voted differently and prayed differently and spoke differently – did you treat them like they were kin, like they were family? Did you walk humbly with your God?

Ruth chose relationship over culture. Ruth chose relationship over convenience. Ruth chose relationship over comfort. And God worked in and through Ruth to further God's mission of bringing blessing to every family of the earth.

## V

And so as we live out our discipleship together here at First Presbyterian Church of Athens, may we remember the example of our great-grandmother in faith, who chose relationship over certainty, relationship over comfort, relationship over prosperity.

These are difficult days to be in

relationship, especially in a community where there is such a range of differing points of view on some of the most pressing issues of our day, from the big things what the church should say and do about racism and poverty and the rule of law, to the smaller things like the irritations and inconveniences brought on by the pandemic.

We are being reminded in these days that people of good faith can disagree with one another, and it would be far simpler if God would just speak God's will to us through a burning bush or by dropping some stone tablets out of the sky.

But more often than not, God speaks to us in between the lines, through the events of our everyday lives. More often than not, God speaks God's will to us through our relationships with one another.

Ruth said to Naomi, "Do not press me to leave you."

Do not press me to leave you.

"Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people."

Thanks be the God.

Amen.