

Hesed
Reading from the New Testament: John 15:9-13
Reading from the Old Testament: Ruth 1:1-18

Okay. Confession time. If your wedding took place between, say, 1955 to 1970 raise your hand. Was there a soloist? Do you remember what they sang? Now, this could apply to folks who exchanged vows after that period, especially if the wedding took place in a small town or country church.

Bathed in the warm light of the chancel, in all of her shimmering beatific glory, stands the exquisitely beaming and beautiful bride, as if posing for a Mary Cassatt portrait. Awkwardly facing her, tugging at the constrictive neck of his ill-fitting and rented tux, is the glassy-eyed groom who is sweating profusely, either because of fraying nerves or the ill-effects of the previous evening's reverie.

Troths plighted, there is an awkward pause as the pastor, sometimes known at weddings as the potted plant, tries to catch the attention of the soloist, cousin of the maid of honor and slow to pick up on the cue that it is time to sing.

A brief shriek of feedback as the soloist clears her throat jerks the wedding guests to attention and the organist sets about making the Wurlitzer whine the intro. And then? *Whither thou goest ... I will go...*

So, true confessions, did anyone have that sung at their wedding? Or, can you at least confess if you attended multiple weddings where this was played? Crestfallen would be the word to describe the reaction of ministers and organists everywhere when the engaged couple requested the song in the pre-marital planning meeting. And yet, for many years that was the song requested, at least until it was eclipsed by those other overused nuptial melodies: *The Wedding Song (He is now to be among you at the calling of your hearts; Rest assured this troubadour is acting on His part)*, and, of course, who can forget... *If a picture paints a thousand words, Then why can't I paint you?*

I personally had to sing those two often enough that the most appropriate drink for me at the reception would have been *Listerine*.

Whither thou goest ... I will go... An initial reading of our text today reveals that the origin of these words had little to do with a wedding. Indeed, the cake topper image of the blissful couple's embrace

that comes to mind with that *Withering* wedding ballad distracts us from probing the power of the declaration made between in-laws in a time of crisis amidst the complexities of their relationship. Wedged between the judges and the kings, this brief book called Ruth, one of only 2 books in the biblical canon to be titled with the name of a woman, marvelously crosses the often-bumpy terrain traversed in the journey of every relationship and not only the ones toasted with champagne.

The story begins in the period of Israel's Judges, the two centuries between the conquest of the land and the establishment of the monarchy; a time when apart from their covenant with God, there was no central structure of governance for Israel's tribes. In times of crisis and threat, individuals (judges) would arise to provide leadership and defense. When the threat receded, so would the judge.

At some point during this period a famine arose in Israel, which inevitably fostered an exodus forced not by powers and principalities but by a paucity of produce. One facet too often neglected in the endless and circular immigration debates around the globe is the question of what you or I would do if caught in desperate circumstances. If you're hungry enough or desperate enough or terrorized enough... What are

you going to do? In the rush to stereotype we forget the human element. We, who have the leisure of platitudes fail to honestly reflect on how we would manage when desperation draws near. Think of Evelyn Waugh's haunting image, "When the waterholes were dry, people sought to drink at the mirage."

Elimelech, Naomi, and their sons, Mahlon, and Chilion, were hungry; hungry enough to leave their promised land. Think about it, Judah was not just their address, but their true home, and even more than that, their identity. The Psalmist declares, "Let Mount Zion be glad, let the towns of Judah rejoice because of your judgments. Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever." How could they possibly leave their home, their heritage? Consider the promise embraced by Abraham and Sarah and the Odyssean journey of their people over the centuries to claim it. Leave?

There's an old Zulu proverb that observes, "Plenty sits still. Hunger is a wanderer." They were hungry and so they went. Ellie Wiesel, recounting his hunger in Nazi concentration camps, said,

“Bread, soup - these were my whole life. I was a body. Perhaps less than that even: a starved stomach. The stomach alone was aware of the passage of time.”

They were hungry, and so they went. Even the direction they headed speaks to their desperation. Moab. Moab lay to the east of Judah across the Dead Sea and was not on particularly good terms with Israel. The Moabites were descendants of Lot's son, Moab, and it was Moab who, echoing the aspersions cast toward immigrants throughout history, once said of the Israelites, "This horde will now lick up all that is around us, as an ox licks up the grass of the field." And it was the Moabite king, Balak, whose curse against the Israelites was thwarted at the last minute by a talking mule. And yet, there were reports of food in Moab so that's where the family travelled. I read somewhere that “when the preferable is unavailable, the available becomes preferable.

As best as they could, Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, and Chilion sought to set up a life in Moab; enrolling the boys in Moab County Community College, finding work, and planting a garden in the backyard of the rented doublewide tent. But, before they had time to breathe, Elimelech dies. Crisis finds their address and makes an

unwanted visit once again. Just when hunger moves out, grief moves in. Yet, at least Naomi has her boys to help her face a culture cold toward women and callous toward widows. There is grief and hardship but there is also joy as she watches Mahlon and Chilion each licking envelopes for wedding invitations and sparring with Ruth and Orpah over what the soloists will sing. Let's just say *Freebird* is quickly dismissed.

However, crisis interrupts again in the form of tragedy as both sons die, casting Ruth and Orpah into the same cocktail of grief and dread as Naomi, a cocktail stirred by those two haunting-through-the-night questions: *What have I lost?* and *What am I going to do?*

Their tragedy is compounded by the math. If survival is precarious for one widow in a culture so dismissive of women, what are the prospects for a household of three? Naomi knows. Naomi, like us, may not have been privy to customs concerning survivors in Moab, but she remembered the customs back home in Judah where the expectation was that brothers of the dear departed would marry the widow. Obviously, that's no help here because the dear departed were brothers, leaving neither Orpah nor Ruth with a plan B. Naomi was

going to have a hard enough time finding a path forward for herself. She was in no position to take responsibility for Orpah and Ruth no matter how much she loved them. The wise move would be to split up and return to whatever family they could find in whatever neighborhood carried the memories of their youth. Orpah agreed and gave her goodbyes, but Ruth was having none of that.

It is at this emotionally fraught crossroads that Ruth surmised she and Naomi had lost enough and that this was no time to lose one another. "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!" When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Now, it may be more to your liking had Naomi rejoiced at Ruth's deep-seated sense of loyalty to her, but all we get is, "When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more..." Naomi may have been skeptical about the way forward, but there are times when all you can muster is: *Okay, let's go*. There are times when one person's drive and commitment and constancy have to be enough for the both of

you. Who is the person to whom you, by all rights, should say, “When doubt was my flashlight, you pulled me along through the dark; When I was giving up, you were just getting started; When I couldn’t see it, you could; When I was sick, worshiping at the porcelain altar, you held my hand and handed me the cold washcloth. I could not have made it without you?”

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” That commitment may be expressed amidst the flowers, recalcitrant ring bearers, and hokey wedding songs, but that commitment is made real in the trenches of life’s twists, tragedies, trials, and traumas. It is the commitment God has made to God’s creation; it is the commitment Jesus made to the disciples in the upper room, and to us from the cross; it is the commitment only the Lord can equip us to sustain when things fall apart, the centre does not hold, and anarchy is loosed...

Ruth, the outsider reveals to us the way of the cross. Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

In Thomas Wolfe's classic, *Look Homeward Angel*, Eugene Gant grew up in a household defined and burdened by dysfunctions so numerous and pervasive that from a young age he yearned for escape. Of Eugene's sister Helen, Wolfe writes, "Sometimes her sweltering and inchoate fury was so great that she threw him on the floor and stamped him. [Eugene] did not mind the physical assault so much as he did the poisonous hatred of her tongue, insanelly clever in fashioning the most wounding barbs. "You little freak – wandering around with your queer dopey face ... Everybody's laughing at you, don't you know that? Don't you?" Then, she'd turn right around and follow up her savage attack with "a wild smother of affection." (Thomas Wolfe, *Look Homeward, Angel*) Every member of the family came equipped with fuses so short, one wayward word or move could spark a conflagration.

And yet, Eugene's perpetually brooding, family disdainful, mother despising, chain-smoking, irascible brother Ben, almost against his own will, would time and again fail in his attempt to ignore Eugene's need, best interest, or trials, could not help himself from always keeping an eye out for Eugene as defender, counselor, rescuer. In the midst of all the chaos, he would not, could not let Eugene go. For all the high drama

and his own inner demons, Ben would not, could not forsake him.

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” May it be so here. In spite of all the noise, rudeness, and venom out there, may it be so here; and by the grace of God may it be so through you out there. Amen.