



Westminster Presbyterian Church Knoxville, TN
November 3, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Where you go..."

Ruth 1:1-18 (NRSV)

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 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!" When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

“Where you go...”

How deep do our connections go?

Frank Griswold served as the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1998 to 2006. You may remember, during that time he consecrated the first openly gay Bishop, Gene Robinson in 2003. You may also remember that that act brought out the worst in American Christianity.

In the ceremony, both Frank Griswold and Gene Robinson wore bullet proof vests. After Robinson become a Bishop there was a schism in the Episcopal Church, with many congregations leaving the denomination. That’s something we Presbyterians know something about.

Frank Griswold recently died of a rare breathing condition where his body could not release enough carbon dioxide. The condition led to strange, otherworldly, ‘trippy’ dreams in his waning days.

His daughter, Eliza Griswold, who is now a Pulitzer Prize winner author, says her father was never a man with much patience.¹ In one repeated vision, he found himself waiting in line to get into heaven, waiting for his number to come up, but the whole thing was too slow. So, he kept waking up in his hospital bed, yelling ‘They have got to speed it up! What is going on up there!’ Before going back to sleep.

¹ Terry Gross, “How culture wars divided one small progressive church in Philadelphia.” *Fresh Air*: National Public Radio. October 28, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/28/nx-s1-5165379/circle-of-hope-culture-wars-eliza-griswold>

In other visions, he saw a clash between the forces of good and evil battling it out, in celestial warfare, not too far afield from the spiritual warfare he had waged in his time as bishop, in the face of militant Christian homophobia.

Today his daughter Eliza Griswold does not identify as a Christian but rather a spiritual seeker. I heard an interview with her this week, about her work and her relationship with her father. She says she attends church sporadically, a ChristEaster: Someone who comes only on Christmas and Easter. Certainly nothing wrong with that.

And yet, ever since her father died, she says she has found a sense of comfort in churches, a sense of home. Even more powerfully, in her books she writes with genuine hope and appreciation about church communities trying to be more loving and inclusive than their denominational boundaries often allow.²

Her new book, *Circle of Hope* is up for a national book award this year. It's about a radical evangelical group in Philadelphia that struggled to survive as it bravely faced its own internalized homophobia and racism. Throughout the interview, there is a sense of the abiding connection between Eliza and Frank Griswold, running through their lives and their work, even and especially after they were separated by Frank's death.

How deep do our connections go?

What makes a connection last?

And what do we owe one another, even when we are separated?

These are the questions that confront us every All Saints Day.

And truth be told, these questions are even more pertinent today.

Because nowadays, it's what separates us that gets all the attention:

Thanks be to God: Tuesday ends an election season that has pulled us apart rather than bring us together.

² Eliza Griswold, *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024).

And it runs deeper than just divisions over partisan politics. Over the past months, we have heard racist, sexist, xenophobic, and homophobic tropes become, almost normal, something you hear every day, something you just shrug off.

- ‘Immigrants poisoning the blood of the country’³
 - I mean, what are we even talking about?

How deep do our connections go, when everyone, everywhere, all at once is talking about how distant we are from each another, how we should be scared of each other?

Coincidentally, this is also the question that faced Ruth and Naomi, on the road back to Judea.

Naomi became a widow in the foreign land of Moab.

Her sons, Mahlon and Chilion, Israelites like their parents, had married Moabite women: Ruth and Orpha. But in those days, the Moabites were the oppressors of the Israelites. The Moabites were the more powerful and established nation, threatening the sovereignty of Israel, only a few generations past their escape from Egyptian slavery.

So when, Mahlon and Chilion die, and Naomi returns to Judea, she advises her newly widowed daughters-in-law:

Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?

Her plea has layers of meaning:

First, Moabites would be met with suspicion if not outright hostility in the land of Judea. What are these oppressors doing in the land of the oppressed?

And second, they are not just Moabites but Moabite women, and even more, Moabite widows. In the Ancient Near East, a woman’s safety, and security, and sustenance derived from her relationship to the men in her family, fathers and husbands. Returning together, a widow and her widowed and foreign-born daughters-in-law, they were risking not just ostracism but starvation.

³ Maggie Astor, “Trump Doubles Down on Migrants ‘Poisoning’ the Country.” *The New York Times*. March 17, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/17/us/politics/trump-fox-interview-migrants.html>.

And this is what makes Ruth's famous speech to her mother-in-law all the more striking. Truth be told, it is a speech often read without context at weddings. But it has nothing to do with the bonds of marriage or romantic love. I bet there's more than a few brides and grooms out in the world who'd be surprised that these beautiful words read at their wedding actually come from a widow to her mother-in-law:

*Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.*

Naomi made clear that she was not holding Ruth and Orpah to any legal commitment. We are not meant to blame Orpah for leaving to go back to her people. It is what Naomi expected.

And yet, Ruth realizes that her ties to her mother-in-law went deeper than a legal commitment or family obligation. She understood that their spirits and fates were joined.

Do not press me to leave you, she says.

God then uses Ruth's fidelity. As we will see, reading through the story, Ruth, despite all odds, remarries while in Judea, a foreigner living among the Israelites. Not only that, but her child is a boy named Obed, who many years later becomes the father of Jesse, and then Jesse, years after that, becomes the father of King David.

A Moabite widow, a marginal figure and a foreigner in the land of Judea, becomes a key figure of Israel's history, and by extension, Christianity's – remember Jesus is a descendent of the line of Ruth, the Moabite, and her grandchild David. All because Ruth recognized her fate was joined to Naomi.

How deep do our connections go?

They are deeper than we can ever know. Broader than we could ever fathom. It is through her appreciation for deep connectivity, deeper than tribal bond or national tie, that God uses Ruth's fidelity for life and not death, in a resurrection story that spans the generations.

And so, as followers of Ruth's descendent, Jesus of Nazareth, we follow her, on this All Saints Sunday, in rejecting the narrative that we are fundamentally separated from one another. We reject all rhetoric, all threats, all demonization that marks the other as fundamentally other. Any speech, slogan, or political program calls into question the personhood or humanity of another. And that includes any action that puts others' lives at risk of violence of any kind.

Because we believe that we are bound together, and that as separated and as distant as we are from one another, like Ruth, we affirm, on a deeper level, despite all evidence to the contrary, our fates are tied to one another.

On this All Saints Sunday, we go so far as to affirm that these ties are greater even than death, that even in the separation between this life and the next, the connection holds. Look at this room. Look at the names that adorn this sanctuary. Each of these names, are more than a name. They are a heart connection, between a person sitting in this room and someone they hold in their heart, who has left this life.

As followers of the Resurrected Christ, a far-flung descendant of Ruth, the Moabite widow, we affirm the resilience of these connections, even after death.

For love is stronger than death, says Song of Songs.

Siblings in Christ, today we stare down a week that is going to test our connections, pull at our heartstrings, and weigh on our Spirits. Remember, in the moments you feel torn, remember in the face of any demonization of the other, remember in the moments we feel so far apart, come back to this place, and remember this place.

Where we affirm, that love is stronger.

And that God will use that love:

To work for justice,

To bring about resurrection life,

In times of trial, that justice, and that resurrection, are a horizon, perhaps too distant to see, but they are nonetheless real.

They were too distant for Ruth to see as well, but she nonetheless believed in them, with everything she had.

And so, in the name of the Creator,
the Sustainer,
and the Redeemer, who is Ruth the Moabite's descendent.

We believe as well.
Amen.