

# **GOD'S STORY, OUR STORY**

## **Bless Be The Love That Binds**

**Ruth 1:1-17**

**PENTECOST 18**

**October 13, 2019**

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Every Sunday, as your pastor, I make a 40 step journey from the chancel, where I preside at worship, to the narthex (lobby), where I greet worshipers. In the chancel, everything has been shaped and ordered by our Lutheran liturgy. The scripture reading tells the story of God's love and plan of salvation. The sermon retells the story in the vernacular of the assembled people. The hymns and prayers gather the voices of worshipers to praise and petition our Triune God. The actions at the Font and the Table reveal God's grace in water, wafer and wine.

At the close of worship, I raise my hands in blessing and benediction, recessing in tandem with our worship assistant to the narthex. There, I bid farewell to all worshipers as they leave, sent out to witness what they have heard and seen in worship to their family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. The people who have just finished doing the 'work of the people,' known as liturgy, make their re-entry into a world of muddled marriages and strained relationships, mid-life boredom and adolescent confusion, elderly loneliness and empty evenings, ethical ambiguity and emotional distress.

The pastor, who has just raised up before the congregation the cup of salvation, now shakes the hand of a man whose wife has left him for another; a woman who has recently received the unwelcome diagnosis of breast cancer; a mother whose teenager is filled with angry rebellion and refuses to listen anymore; a long-time, faithful employee whose job has been unexpectedly discharged because of an executive decision at headquarters to downsize. All of this leaves the pastor, who has magisterially handled a difficult scriptural text that went unheard, to shake

hands that are tense with worry, quaking with fear, and calloused with overwork, looking them in the eyes and calling them by name.

However, to a visitor, the church lobby will look like a warm and fuzzy place, as members, who are familiar with each other, exchange greetings and seemingly share joys. The pastor, though, picks up signals, signs of doubt in one, despair in another. The pastor knows that among his or her people in the days, months, and maybe in the year ahead, there will be deaths no one anticipated, accidents no one thought possible, illnesses that escaped detection or diagnosis, and problems no one even considered during the previous hour of worship and sanctuary. In the narthex, the trials and travails of people fill the pastor's agenda and calendar for another week, full of pastoral conversation, visitation, comfort and guidance.

The narthex, not the chancel, is the place where pastors truly connect God's story with the people's stories, and invite them to bind their story to God's story with love. For this reason, Ruth is a useful Biblical book for both the chancel and the narthex. Her stories takes place ***"in the days where judges ruled"*** and ***"there was famine in the land"*** (1:1), a notorious chapter and an uncertain period in Israel's history. The Book of Ruth follows the Old Testament's seventh book, Judges, which concludes in this manner: ***"In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes"*** (21:25).

Ruth, an outsider, not born into the Hebrew faith, and who felt no natural part of it, became integrated into the larger story of God's people. We learn by reading her 'short' story that Ruth adopts her mother-in-law's country, faith, and ways, and becomes a named character in God's salvation history. The Book concludes with Ruth going from being an outsider and stranger, to becoming the wife of an upstanding citizen, and the great grandmother of Israel's future king, David. She is recognized as being the daughter-in-law who is better than seven sons (4:15).

For our Hebrew spiritual ancestors, the Book of Ruth became an explicitly pastoral document, when it was assigned as a reading at the annual Feast of Pentecost. The theme for the Jewish Pentecost (from which we take our Christian

Day of Pentecost), is the covenant that God made with the Israelites on Mount Sinai — that same covenant we heard last week in the Book of Deuteronomy — the Ten Commandments. At Sinai, Israel was given structure and direction for its life together as God’s covenantal and redeemed people. The people discovered who God was and where they stood with God. In many congregations still (both Jewish and Christian), the first day of Pentecost is celebrated by the confirmation of adolescents, with confirmation being an identity rite in which we affirm who God has shown Himself to be in relation to us.

Last week, we heard the first two sentences in the Sinai revelation, which set two realities side by side. ***“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me”*** (Deuteronomy 5:6-7). For Jews, the Book of Exodus is their genesis story. It is a story born out of a Father God’s love for His children, Israel. From the covenant formed by God at Mt. Sinai, Israel’s history as a people and a nation began. The Book of Ruth is important because it serves to connect people who are out of the mainstream of Israel’s story, who did not have an ancestor at Sinai, and who could have been easily left out or overlooked. Ruth helps readers to understand, see, and feel the love that binds a Moabite woman to God’s ongoing story of salvation.

For pastoral work, the most important implication for us is its form. It, too, is a story. Ruth is publicly read on the first day of Pentecost worship to help people realize that God’s great salvation story connects ordinary people with limited prospects into God’s story. For the pastor of the chancel and the narthex, this is important, for it means that we have a precedent for grafting any person who wants to become part of our community of faith, allowing them to do so and even become a vital part of it, as Ruth did.

There are many people who come here and sit in a church pew, who feel that they have nothing in common with what they hear in the church’s preaching and teaching. They cannot find any connection between their inner lives and what is expressed in the worship of the faith community. Worse, they sometimes, by

selective hearing and avoidance of hand or eye contact, feel excluded and unnoticed. Like Naomi, they are embittered and empty and don't see where and how they fit into God's story. Like Ruth, they desperately need to connect to a greater, more hopeful and fulfilling larger story. The venerable, elderly, and legally blind Lutheran theologian, Joseph Sittler, whom I had the pleasure of sitting with at a pastors' gathering decades ago in Baltimore, once said, **"All things are more bearable if we make a story of them. And Ultimate desolations are made more bearable and significant when the story is the Ultimate Story."**

In the chancel, the pastor tells, prays, and reenacts the story that has its beginnings, as well as its ending, with God. In the narthex, the pastor sees, hears, or senses snippets, snapshots, and pulses of people's private, personal stories, and invites them to share it in a more confidential setting. That way, their names and struggles, their sins and innermost secrets, their griefs and sorrows can be added to the story, whose plot originates with God. It moves in with a repentant and revised middle, and a conclusion in the Book of Life. No Biblical story is just a story, any more than is any person's story. Each deals with actual events and interpretations, in which there is a Creator, Redeemer, and Director, with whom ordinary people in history get involved.

To do pastoral work, a pastor must be a good listener. The pastoral act of listening, like prayer, which requires our total attention and being, is the pastor's major contribution in the creation of revised stories. It takes place in times of conversation, counsel, and visitation. Story telling of this kind cannot take place in the chancel, for no one wants to hear his or her story hijacked or extemporized from the pulpit. It cannot take place in the narthex, for there is too much distraction and too little time! When I visit or sit with and listen to another person, we make a story from our conversation together. They become part of my story, and I, theirs. We find out where we, together, fit into the plot of God's story.

Beloved people of God, the three main characters of Ruth show three ways of getting into God's story. Naomi got into the story by complaining. Ruth got into the story by asking for what she truly needed. And Boaz got into the story by becoming responsible for Ruth and Naomi. Ruth will become grafted into Israel's history and, later, into its Messiah's genealogy. She is one of four women who become, for us, an example of how God's grace and love works in out-of-the-way places in and among out-of-the-way people. So blest be the love which tied Ruth to God's story, and blest be the ties of holy baptism and communion, which loves us into God's story.

AMEN