

Where you go, I will go.

Ruth 1:1-18

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Northminster Presbyterian Church

Michael D. Kirby

(A truncated sermon to accommodate All Saints' and Communion liturgies)

What had she said again?

Naomi had been through a lot and sometimes it took her a second or two to clear away the cobwebs to get to her memories...

Where You Go, I will Go.

Where you lodge I will lodge.

Your people will be my people, and your God my God.

For so many years those words had echoed in Naomi's thoughts. It had been the moment when Naomi realized that everything would change...It was the beginning of that uncomfortable generational transition moment when the daughter, or rather daughter-in-law, began to take responsibility for her mother by marriage.

O sure, Naomi's family would end up taking them in...and Naomi would use her connections to help Ruth have a future...but this was the start of the new era. For Ruth was the one who would say those words...become the embodiment of Hesed...steadfast love. From this day on, Naomi need never wonder if she would be alone. From that day on, as my friend MaryAnn McKibben Dana once put it, Ruth's promise was "engraved on her heart with a love so deep it actually hurt sometimes."

Think about it for a moment...Naomi's husband had died. Her sons had died. And her only hope was to go home. But she would not go back to the city of bread... Bethlehem alone. It would once again be a place where she would find bread...and family and a future...all with Ruth.

Naomi knew it was probably not in Ruth's best interests to go back with her...it was risky. Surely it would have been easier for Ruth to go back to her own family...to find a new husband...a safe life. But Ruth wasn't concerned with her own security...but more concerned with Naomi's.

Ruth would go back with her...and glean for grain in the fields of Naomi's kinsman, Boaz...essentially picking up the amounts left behind by the harvesters so the poor and unprotected could gather food for themselves.

How many times Naomi was grateful...grateful for what Ruth had done...grateful for that day when she had tried to send them away...

"Go home," Naomi had said.

Orpah had been obedient and said, "Goodbye."

"Go home," Naomi had said.

And Ruth had said, "I am already there."

People have frequently talked about the Biblical heroes who might have inspired Jesus as a small boy...the stories that gave him the chance to discover who he was and who he was called to be...

For a long time now, I've wondered...was she one of them? Was Ruth one of Jesus' role models?

He knew he was out of the House of David...and he knew that this Moabite refugee had been the Grandmother of King David...the greatest leader Israel had ever known...But did he know...did he know what the Gospel of Matthew records...that 14 generations after David...the Exiles returning from Babylon who would write down Ruth's story for the first time would lift up her story as counter-testimony to those who argued for the purity of their tradition being tainted by Moabite wives....Did he know that 14 more generations on...he would be a direct descendent of this faithful, self-sacrificing stranger in a strange land?

I wonder...was his understanding of radical hospitality motivated in part by hearing stories of his almost 30-times great-grandmother who had also been a homeless wanderer relying on the hospitality of strangers? Could it be that at least a part of his sense of loyalty and commitment...his willingness to offer his life and future all for the wellbeing of others...was her legacy for him?

Today we are invited to consider the legacies that we have received...the 20 centuries of Christ-following women and men who have kept the faith, creating families and communities of praise and hope...who listened in every age for a fresh and transforming,

reforming word from the Spirit...and sought to live for the justice, hope, peace and compassion that Jesus taught and lived....

We are specifically invited to remember the faithful legacies of the saints of this community of faith...those women and men who almost a century ago came together to learn, to worship, to proclaim good news, to tend the deep roots of their love, their hopes, their commitment,...to grow a community of faith that is still branching out...bearing fruit...here...

Today we celebrate and give thanks to God for those whose willing and loving sacrifices of time and prayer and finances and compassion transformed the corner of Harrison and Central Park to a place of welcome....a place where children find an empowering start on weekdays and on Sundays....a place where the kitchen buzzes with those preparing meals for those who know hunger many days a month...a place where plans are made for mission partnerships on three continents.... and for mission endeavors from inside our own walls to the streets of Chicago to the Hollers of Appalachia...

It seems fair to suggest Ruth inspired that carpenter from Galilee...Which best the question?...Who are the saints who have inspired you? Parents? Sunday School teachers? Those who set examples striving for social or economic justice? Those who taught you how to love someone other than yourself? Someone who showed you that the great gift that thinking about and working for the welfare of others can be so important in a me-centered world?

As we think of those saints who have inspired us...and those who today inspire us to support and dedicate ourselves and our resources to the bright future that God has in store for Northminster, let us always remember our mother in the faith who said Where you Go, I will Go....

But more than that...may we never forget the God who lives that promise with us every day...never forget the Christ whose saving love meets us wherever we are on life's journey and says "where you go I already am"..."where you are, I will always be"...who promises that every "your people" we can imagine are already his...already loved...already bearing God's image...and who promises never to leave us...and never to leave us the way we are...ever drawing us forward in hope...in grace...in love...

Surely Naomi thanked God every day for the family that together she and Ruth made...May we find that place of gratitude within us—for this family—and may that gratitude inspire lives of grace, of compassion, of generosity, of hope in us each day.

May it also inspire our renewed commitment...that where God is at work, we will be also...That where God is bringing new life—we will seek to live....and that we will claim all of God's people as our people...

Thanks be to God.