BUFFALO UNITED METHODIST

Sun May 24 - Where You Go, I Will Go | Ruth 1:1-18

In 2005 there were significant layoffs at the church I was working for. And I was part of the layoffs. That was a real low point in my life.

When you get "let go", I don't know about you, but it was hard on my sense of self, doubting my self-worth, pushed on my ability to trust God.

Not working made me feel just out of touch with others, invisible, isolated, and useless. And when church is also your workplace, but then isn't any more…there is the sitting alone on Sunday mornings, avoiding conversations after church, struggling to have an open heart and sing worship songs.

But during that dark time, there was one co-worker who was especially loyal and committed to me. It didn't really make sense.

I wasn't doing my job, I wasn't a co-worker, I had nothing to offer her. I didn't feel like I was good friendship material. Go, and live your best life…while I crash and burn.

She was a Ruth to me and I didn't know it. She chose to stay connected, caring about my life, and reached out to me.

And I was a full-on Naomi…emotionally struggling with God, facing big changes, not positive how things would turn out. Was I bitter? You bet!

And I am so grateful for my friend who is still part of my life. Her companionship during those times gave me stability and hope, and helped me survive and find a new way forward.

In February 2020, Carol Kiparsky, 77, and Ian Irwin, 72, survived eight days lost in the wilderness near Inverness after a Valentine's Day hike went terribly wrong. With no food, light clothing, and freezing nighttime temperatures, the odds stacked against them were very high.

In fact, the odds of a bad outcome were so overwhelming, search crews eventually shifted from rescue to recovery, fearing the worst. Yet when rescuers finally found them, they were alive — holding hands.

Authorities credited their survival partly to finding water nearby, but also to the way they cared for one another. Carol reportedly protected Ian from thorns and poison oak.

They endured because they stayed together, they literally clung to one another.

Very similar to Ruth and Naomi. Ruth refused to abandon Naomi, declaring, "Where you go I will go." Ruth and Naomi remind us that God often carries people through darkness not by removing hardship immediately, but by giving them faithful companions who refuse to let go.

Stories like these, which echo Ruth and Naomi's companionship and commitment, have really been hitting me hard lately. Maybe because these values stand in such stark contrast to what we value as Americans.

We live in a culture that teaches us to move on quickly, to stay productive, to keep relationships efficient and useful. But Ruth shows us another way, a way of steadfast presence.

Sometimes, this attitude seeps into the church. I was thinking this is true when we try to appreciate our volunteers. And it is good to value our volunteers!

But it can create a bit of an improper philosophy of appreciation, preaching to myself here, the temptation is easy to fall into. I am tempted to appreciate you more if you do more.

But from God's perspective…you are a beloved child of God. You are all precious in God's sight.

Maybe it's about appreciating people in general, appreciate they are here and committed to this faith community. How do we celebrate people who reflect Ruth and Naomi's steadfast commitment to each other…how others here love God and are committed to this church.

Everyone should be equally appreciated. How can we get better at that?

In every generation there are fears – about being too old to matter, too young to be trusted, or about being tasked with taking care of everyone else (parents, children, and grandchildren).

But God calls us to remain together, to cling, to commit to one another.

Ruth and Naomi's steadfast love became not just a source of survival; it was where love and light and God's Presence and care shone through. Companionship, loyalty, and sacrificial care carried them through darkness when they could not make it alone.

Theirs is truly a gut-wrenching story.

Ruth and Naomi faced multiple significant challenges…famine, uprooting and traveling to live in a foreign ungodly place, so many deaths, uncertainty, and spiritual disorientation and pain, the tearing apart of family ties, stress of more dangerous travel, and fear of the future.

But we also have a beautiful story.

It is also a story that captures something God values deeply — the choice to belong to one another in steadfast love. How through Ruth, God is calling us to belong to one another, to choose steadfast love and companionship across the generations even when things may feel shaky, empty or uncertain.

God values Ruth's decision to cling to Naomi in love so much God pulled Ruth into Jesus' genealogy. Ruth's covenant loyalty becomes part of the lineage through which covenant love enters the world in Christ.

God wanted that beautiful part of Ruth's spiritual and biological DNA to become part of Jesus' life.

God honored Ruth's steadfast love so deeply that her story became woven into the lineage of Jesus himself. Give that a moment to sink in.

I say all that because it then makes sense for me to say this.

We should probably pay attention to Ruth's choices. We should take time to look at her passion, faith, and commitment to Naomi.

To grapple with and grasp that Ruth commits herself to Naomi, to stay with her despite having no obligation to do so.

Modeling to us God's gracious love for each of us and the love we are called to have for one another, especially across the generations.

First, let's note how loss and grief give shape to this story and impact Naomi's perspective.

We see in verses 3 and 4 how Naomi's outlook on life is significantly impacted by the death of her husband and sons. She even expresses how she feels abandoned by God in verse 13, **"My daughters, it is more bitter for me than you, because the Lord's hand has turned against me."**

She defines her experience as bitter, even going so far as to rename herself Mara, meaning "bitter" in verse 20. Naomi's grief shapes her outlook on herself and her future, despite the desire of her daughters-in-law to support and be with her.

Sometimes, people in older generations may feel completely abandoned because of what and who they have lost, even if they are surrounded by people and remain in community. To accept new, younger people and new ways of doing things may feel like one more loss of the faith and church that they once knew.

It is important to name that, to lament how that may feel. We need to offer each other space to lament even as we are focusing on honoring our past, our spiritual legacy in our 140/40 efforts.

We also, at the same time, need to encourage each other to trust in the One who shaped their own treasured past, is also actively inviting us into and leading us into newness of life.

Another theme in this story, going a bit deeper now, again affirming and saying out loud that our value does not lie in what we can offer.

We are the beloved children of God. But Naomi struggled with this. She expresses a sense of being too old to be of use to her daughters-in-law in verses 11 through 13.

"Why would you come with me? Am I going to have more sons, who could become your husbands?" Return home…I am too old to have another husband. "Return home my daughters, go back to your mothers' home. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Naomi felt useless. She felt she was too old.

But Ruth shows Naomi that her value as a person, her belovedness, is not a result of what she can do for Ruth. Rather, she binds her life to Naomi's out of love.

Let's just let that sink in too. Let's take a moment to affirm that our church is bound together not by what we can do for one another but by God's love for us.

Ruth was guided by a marriage covenant, in how she valued Naomi.

Our covenant, which happens in our baptism by water and the Spirit of God, shapes us to be God's people together, having a shared life, a shared mission. Sometimes we forget to do this, we forget our covenant to God and one another.

We forget that relationships require presence. Church becomes a family when we linger with one another. Shared ministry load is one of the ways we carry each other.

These are some of the ways we fail to live fully in our commitment to one another. Ruth and Naomi are challenging you to live differently, to find a different and new way of being here.

In fact, their lives invite us to choose to walk together as a real family.

With the death of Ruth's husband, she no longer has any legal obligation to Naomi. Nevertheless, she chooses to walk alongside her, especially in this time of grief and vulnerability.

Moreover, Ruth goes with Naomi back to a land, people, and religion that is not her own. As individuals and as a family, what would it look like if all of us made an intergenerational commitment to walk together in solidarity and love with all of the generations; even if they love things or live lives that seem really different from our own, even foreign to us.

I mean what about the widowed, single or even married but still lonely individuals who may not have the family support systems that our culture places such high value on. In what ways might the church be a place of belonging and care?

I couldn't help but turn to nature and the animal world for more examples of being like Ruth and Naomi. The lessons animals teach us about sticking together, companionship and loyalty, and love…even across species.

I admit I kind of fell down a rabbit hole on this one.

For example, this example of a cheetah and a dog bonding. Because cheetahs are naturally anxious animals, calm companion dogs help them socialize and reduce stress.

Koko became known for caring for kittens gently and emotionally.

Elephants sometimes display surprisingly gentle protective behavior toward dogs.

If creation itself reflects this instinct to cling together in vulnerability, how much more should the people of God?

Our church is a beloved family, bound together not by what we can do for one another but by God's love for us.

In a world that teaches people to disconnect, move on, and protect themselves, Ruth shows us the holy power of staying.

Staying present.
Staying compassionate.
Staying committed.

Ruth's famous words . "Where you go I will go…" is covenant language. Reminding us that Ruth is not merely being nice. She is embodying covenant faithfulness — the kind of steadfast love God shows Israel.

Ruth's loyalty is more than friendship. It reflects the covenant love of God — a love that stays when leaving would be easier.

And sometimes, the very thing that carries someone through the wilderness is simply knowing another person refused to let go. Amen!

Time of Reflection:

1. Where in your life right now do you most need someone to "stay" with you?

2. And who, here at BUMC, might God be calling you to stay beside with Ruth-like love and faithfulness?