**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**October 31st, 2021**

**Where You Go, I Will Go**

1. This Rebellious Book

Many of us will be familiar with this passage, particularly verses 16-18, where we hear the

loyalty of Ruth – where she affirms to Naomi, her mother-in-law, that she will go wherever she will go and Naomi’s people will become her people. This is a text we often hear in marriage ceremonies, speaking about the strong link between two individuals, leaving what they know, so they can be in full relationship with one another. When we read it though in the setting of a marriage, I don’t think any of us realize just how strong this sacrifice is for Ruth and how it profoundly changes the future of Israel.

 Ruth is a Moabite. She, in ancient times, would be considered an enemy of the state of Israel. She is also a widow, and in this particular culture, widows face peril because they lose the support of their husbands. Ruth is a foreigner, a woman, a widow, and perhaps most importantly, again, an enemy of Israel. Her status on many fronts would make her an unlikely character to be faithful and without consequence, she could go along with her sister-in-law Orpah to the land they know and love.

 Yet, as we know, she doesn’t choose that, she chooses loyalty, but she also turns her back on everything that society would tell her is right. The bottom line is that in this world, tribal and family origins firmly fixed one’s identity and one’s gods and people did not voluntarily abdicate. The outsider is now the faithful one, the one who expresses and lives her commitment to God and God’s people.

 What’s even cooler about the trajectory of the story, is that by Ruth making this choice, the line of David will be saved. Ruth makes history not only when she clings to Naomi, but for the future of nations.

1. Where’s God

I think a fair question though as we read this text is – where is God? Why did God cause

famine? Why did Naomi lose her husband and sons? Why are they in this precarious situation to begin? Where is God?

 God is within the human interactions, just alike many of our daily interactions. We may not lift God to the surface of what’s going on, but we know God is there and, in our actions, and in our words. It’s hard to say why God would allow his people to struggle, but even in the struggle, God is created and crafting something new and something viable for years to come. Ruth will later get married, she will bear a son, Naomi will be overjoyed by this news and there is a resolution to this difficult situation.

1. Where are we?

The second question that always comes to mind when we are reading and examining any text within Scripture is: why does this matter? What does this text have to tell us, right here, right now, today?

 As you can imagine, answering that question is much easier with some texts than some others, but when we look here, this is why the text matters to me today.

 Ruth reminds me that it’s often the outsiders in this world that surprise us, change us, and lead us to transformation. It’s often the people we find unique, odd, a little interesting who may not fit in or may have had their own struggles that surprise us. This is a trend in the Scriptures we see, and I’m sure another fancier theologian could put it better than I – but ultimately, it’s clear, it’s the societal weird ones who seem to make all the difference in God’s world.

 So, if you are weird, keep being weird.

 The text also does teach us about loyalty. As a newly married woman, it’s hard to put my situation right over this text, but I can’t necessarily see myself clinging to my mother-in-law and following her to the ends of the earth. If you married and have a mother-in-law – consider that idea yourself. Now, I love Holly, my mother-in-law, but still, that level of loyalty that we see in the text ultimately is, well, impressive. I can’t say I have it in me.

 Now, Bob, my lay leader – I know you would go and follow your mother-in-law, but let’s be honest, she makes really good cookies and is funny and makes awesome pizzas. I think you might be one of the really lucky ones.

 But what Ruth is doing here is something to aspire to, the bravery, that loyalty, that sense of family that compels you to leave everything behind. Ruth, here in this story, is a figurehead for these ideas, and her willingness to go with Naomi, even without being asked, is stunningly impressive. These are virtues we can try to hold within our own lives.

 And my last thought might be a stretch, but I believe it’s in the text – when Ruth says she will go with Naomi, it reminds me of those folks who show up in our lives when we say we don’t want anyone in our lives, but in reality, we need them. I think it’s hard to ask for help, it’s easy to push people away in a struggle, but when that person comes beside you and says, “I’m going to love you anyway” – that’s life changing. That’s life giving. And that’s God at work in human lives.

 Naomi can’t stop Ruth from coming with her, and sometimes, we need that person to do the same with us. Come with us into the hard situations, come in and advocate for us, come into our lives and be with us in the vulnerable and scary moments – that’s Ruth, that’s a faithful individual seeking to be God’s servant in this world.

1. What Next?

I hope that you are able to be a bit bolder this week and embody some of Ruth’s

characteristics. I hope that when you could stay within the bounds of normal and comfortable, that you stretch yourself a little further and be the odd man out when you need to. I hope that you can journey with people, even if they don’t ask you to, and join them in facing whatever comes next. I hope you are a friend, like Ruth, who is faithful in service and when you feel the nudge, you follow God’s call to help.

 In these days, when the pandemic still remains with us, it can be hard to figure out how to sit with people – I’ve found it profoundly difficult myself, but maybe pastoral care looks different than everything we knew before. Sometimes being with people in struggle means we are on a video chat or a phone call. And sometimes, and this is dicey to say, but when the struggle is real and the world is melting down, sometimes, you just gotta hug your masked neighbor. Sometimes it’s through cards. We’re all figuring it out together.

 But my prayer remains: may we be courageous as we serve God in this world in way like Ruth, willing to be the odd-man out, willing to risk it all, and willing to step into difficult situations that can change lives. Amen.