

Ruth 1:1-18  
 6 November 2011  
 All Saints' Sunday  
*(revised from a previous sermon)*

### “Even In-Laws Can be Saints”

I want to start today with a little story. Here's something from the “sorry if you've already heard this one” department.

A woman was leaving a convenience store with her morning coffee. She noticed a most unusual funeral procession approaching the nearby cemetery. A long black hearse was followed by a second long black hearse about 50 feet behind. Behind **that** hearse was a solitary woman walking a very mean looking dog on a leash. Behind those two were 200 women walking in single file. The woman's curiosity got the best of her.

She respectfully approached the woman walking the dog and said, “I'm so sorry for your loss, and I know that this is a bad time to disturb you, but I've never seen a funeral procession like this. Whose funeral is it?”

The woman replied, “Well, that first hearse is for my husband.” “If you don't mind my asking, what happened to him?” The woman replied, “My dog attacked and killed him.” She inquired further, “Well, who's in the second hearse?” The woman answered, “My mother-in-law. She was trying to help my husband when the dog turned on her.”

A tender and thoughtful moment of silence passed between the two women. Then the one with her morning cup of coffee asked, “May I borrow your dog?” The answer she received: “Get in line.”

And now we have the obligatory light bulb joke. Question: How many mothers-in-law does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: One. She holds it in place, remains completely still, and waits for the world to revolve around her.<sup>1</sup>

(Sincere apologies to those of you who are a mother-in-law! I can honestly say that my mother-in-law has given me very little grief. Of course, the fact that we quite **literally** do not speak the same language and live on opposite sides of the globe **may** have something to do with it!)

Our Old Testament reading in the book of Ruth concerns a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law whose relationship, far from being worthy of jokes, instead becomes an intimate friendship. The story of Ruth and Naomi is one of both tremendous loss and of tremendous gain.

I consider the book of Job to be one of the world's great pieces of literature. Likewise, it's been said of the book of Ruth that it's “a perfect example of the art of telling a story.”<sup>2</sup> It's sometimes referred to as a “novella,” a short novel. Nobody knows who wrote it or when it was written. There are comments in the book that suggest it was written hundreds of years after the events described—well after the return from exile in Babylon.

<sup>1</sup> both are based on material from [www.motherinlawstories.com/mother-in-law\\_jokes\\_page.htm](http://www.motherinlawstories.com/mother-in-law_jokes_page.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Dorothea Ward Harvey, “Ruth, Book of,” *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 131.

The relationship between Ruth and Naomi is a key feature of the story. Later on, Boaz, a rich relative of Naomi's, enters the scene. He eventually fulfills the law in Deuteronomy 25, which says that a brother (or in this case, a close relative) must take his brother's wife if she is widowed and has no sons. That way, the dead man's bloodline can go on.

Last week, I mentioned how the Sadducees tell Jesus that crazy story about the seven brothers who die in succession, each one having married the same woman. This is where that tradition comes from.

Still, it's been noted, "The emphasis of the book...is not so much on Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law, as on the fact that Ruth was accepted in Israel in spite of her foreignness."<sup>3</sup>

To understand what's going on with that, I need to set the stage. The book begins, "In the days when the judges ruled" (v. 1). The translation in the Good News Bible doesn't follow the Hebrew very well.

This was before the monarchy was established. The judges were regional tribal elders. There are parts of the world that still have something like this—places with weak central governments. Afghanistan and Somalia, for example, are ruled by such figures. A less flattering term is "warlord."

The names of the people in our passage all have symbolic meaning. We begin with the husband and wife, Elimelech and Naomi, who live in Bethlehem, which means "house of bread." Unfortunately, this "house of bread" is suffering a famine, so Elimelech (meaning, "my God is king") and Naomi ("pleasant") are forced to go to Moab. That's located in modern day Jordan.

However, Elimelech dies, and their two sons marry Moabite women. Mahlon ("sick") and Chilion ("wasting away") die about ten years later. So Naomi is left with her daughters-in-law, Orpah ("gazelle" or "the back") and Ruth ("beauty" or "friend"). Whoever wrote this had some fun with the names!

Naomi hears that the famine has ended, so she decides to return home. When her daughters-in-law say that they'll go too, Naomi says no. "Stay here in Moab with your own people. Find husbands here. You sure won't be getting any from me!" Orpah is convinced. So she turns around, showing her back, and like a lovely gazelle, she hastens toward home. (These names are symbolic for a reason!)

Ruth, however, refuses to be swayed. She expresses her "beautiful friendship" in verses 16 and 17: "Do not press me to leave you or 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—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" That's some powerful stuff!

This is where the bit about Ruth's acceptance in Israel **despite** her foreignness comes into play. Ruth isn't just **any** foreigner—she's from Moab. The Moabites were not well liked. Deuteronomy 23 speaks to that.

Listen to this: "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt." It gets better. "You shall never promote their welfare or their

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<sup>3</sup> Harvey, 133.

prosperity as long as you live” (vv. 3-4a, 6). It sounds like **someone** is holding a grudge, big time!

In a later day, the Jews would look at the Samaritans in a similar way.

Ruth’s devotion to her mother-in-law, as well as her courage, can be seen when we consider her prospects. She’s going to a land with a different language, different customs—to a place with whom her **own** country has had a troubled relationship. We might wonder about **her** welcome.

Ruth is sometimes praised for the loving decision she makes. But it’s also possible to see her as having no choice in the matter. It’s been observed, “In many ways...the most [revealing] decisions are those that a person is never aware of making. Instead, they flow without reflection from whatever character or virtues have been developed.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, it’s just who they are.

Jesus says something similar in Luke 6: “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (v. 45). Who we are is what we do.

Ruth’s character outweighs the fact that she’s a foreigner. Later in the book, we see that she’s included in the ancestry of David. That’s a major reason why the book of Ruth is in the scriptures. And by extension, she’s an ancestor of the messianic Son of David.

The importance of Ruth’s being a foreigner needs to be underlined. The story has a strong theme of universalism. That is, the God of Israel is the God of the entire earth, the only God. That was a key point to make at the time—after the return from exile—when the Jewish people found themselves in a whole new world.

Today is All Saints’ Sunday. It might be asked, “Why preach from the book of Ruth? What does it have to do with today?” Those are good questions!

Ruth the foreigner, Ruth the outsider, is received into the people of God. She becomes so integrated that the bloodline of Israel’s greatest king—and indeed, of the messiah—flows through her.

Are there any foreigners that **we** can receive? Are there any outsiders that we can welcome? Saints come in all shapes and sizes. Even in-laws can be saints. Though you and I are sinners, we also are saints.

Many people feel **unworthy** to be part of the church. But who among us would claim that it’s due to our accomplishments, our merit, that we are part of the church? Each of us is an outsider in one way or another. Fortunately, Jesus specializes in outsiders.

In her commentary on the Rule of Benedict, *Insights for the Ages*, Joan Chittister speaks about these kinds of concerns.<sup>5</sup> “The idea that the spiritual life is only for the strong, for those who don’t need it anyway, is completely dispelled in the Rule of Benedict. Here spiritual athletes need not apply.”

Speaking as a member of a monastic community, she says, “Monasticism is for human beings only. The abbot and prioress [leaders of male and female communities,

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<sup>4</sup> [www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_n29\\_v111/ai\\_15861171](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n29_v111/ai_15861171) (“The Only Thing to Do,” *Christian Century*, Oct 19, 1994)

<sup>5</sup> Joan Chittister, *Insights for the Ages* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 100.

respectively] are told quite clearly that they are to see themselves as physicians and shepherds tending the weak and carrying the lost.”

The same is true in churches. “What we have,” she says, “are just people, simple people who never meet their own ideals and often, for want of confidence and the energy that continuing commitment takes, abandon them completely. Then, our role...is simply to try to soothe what hurts them, heal what weakens them, lift what burdens them, and wait. The spiritual life is a process, not an event. It takes time and love and help and care. It takes our patient presence. Just like everything else.”

On this All Saints’ Sunday, we have a challenge. Again, last week, I mentioned how Jesus is tested with the question, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Mt 22:36).

In Mark’s version of the encounter, there’s a lot more sincerity. After Jesus gives his answer, the scribe who questions him says, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (12:32-33).

Proving that not **all** of the religious leaders were caught up in legalism, Jesus responds, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (v. 34).

So this is our challenge. Reflecting on Ruth, reflecting on the story of all the saints, we have to say that loving God and neighbor is more important than any act of worship. It’s what worship worthy of the name leads us to do. What we do here this morning, if it has any meaning, has to be shown when we leave this place.

Ruth the Moabite made her journey to Bethlehem one step at a time. That’s how we welcome the outsider, even an in-law: one step at a time.