

“I Will Go...”

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
November 11, 2018
Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

We rang the tower bell at 11:00 a.m., the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, 100 years after the armistice, the end of World War I. Armistice Day, signaling the end of the war, evolved into Veterans Day, a day to remember and recognize those who have served, and in particular those who lost their lives in service. Both functions matter, as the prayer on the cover of the bulletin suggests.¹

The impact of World War I on this congregation was significant. We contributed to the Red Cross and other relief efforts on a regular basis. Paul Moore Strayer, my predecessor, was granted a leave of absence so he could serve as chaplain at a training camp in South Carolina.

In all, 132 Third Church members served in a military or civilian capacity. Five members died, one in training stateside and four overseas. Their names are commemorated on a plaque on the east wall of the sanctuary, underneath the

¹ Compassionate God, Source of Mercy, we pay tribute to those who have served our country, to express our gratitude for their courage and selflessness, both those among us today and those of generations past. This nation, built by those born of this soil and those who have come here from all the corners of the earth, is on a continual journey toward its destiny. May we never let down those who have served in defense of this country. May we uphold the values of freedom, of the inherent dignity of every human being, by our own right conduct, by the kindness and tolerance we show to one another. May we lead the world by example, and become, in the words of Isaiah, a light to the nations. Then will the labors and sacrifices of these veterans be honored not in words alone, but by our deeds.

Rabbi Laurence Milder
Union for Reform Judaism

six stained glass windows that were dedicated January 1, 1922. We remember them now -- Harvey Lawrence Cory, William Leslie Magill, Henry Oscar Sommer, Frank Merritt Stewart, Chauncey Tyler Young – their names and their service, even as we acknowledge all who have served in any era, with deep gratitude for their service and with fervent prayers that, in the language of our tradition, we pray and work for the day when we study war no more.

The power of the story of Ruth abides. The power of friendship, power of community, of deep kindness, of covenantal relationship, the power of faithfulness, the power of love. Last week we heard Part I of the story. A famine in Judea, and a man named Elimelech leaves Bethlehem to go to Moab. With him he takes his wife Naomi and their two sons. Elimelech dies. The sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. The sons die. Naomi, a foreign widow is left with no husband and no sons, her daughters-in-law with no husbands. It gets no bleaker than this. Naomi implores Orpah and Ruth to let her be, to find new husbands, to start new lives. They say no. She insists. Orpah does so, without blame, but Ruth stays. Ruth stays, and Part I ends with iconic words that echo across generations: Where you go, I will go. Your people will become my people. Your God, my God.

Where you go, I will go. It has a geographical meaning, to be sure, that Ruth will literally follow Naomi back to her homeland, where Ruth, a foreign widow, will face great challenge. But “where you go, I will go” moves us beyond geography.

- I will go with you into your grief.
- I will go with you into your hardship.
- I will go with you into your illness.
- I will go with you into your depression.
- I will go with you into your addiction.
- Where you go, I will go.

They go to Bethlehem. A man enters the picture – as a friend says, this isn’t the most feminist of stories! Nonetheless, this man named Boaz exhibits and

exhibits again extraordinary kindness. Ruth asks Boaz why he is so kind to her, a foreigner. His first response is this – I am being kind to you because I have seen how kind you have been to your mother-in-law. This is kindness, yes, compassionate kindness, as we see both Ruth and now Boaz bucking tradition and playing against type by acting the way they do.

My two grandmothers, before they were my grandmothers, conspired together so that my parents would meet, and like any good mother-in-law whose widowed daughter-in-law is watching out for her, Naomi does the same and moves things along. She arranges for Boaz's and Ruth's kindness to become something more. An unlikely marriage follows, and an even more unlikely birth of a son, Obed. God's blessings abound and all is well.

How does this story connect with yours? Where do you find yourself in the story? Are you Orpah or Ruth or Naomi, faced with grief and an uncertain future? Are you Ruth, responding with compassion, leaving the familiar to demonstrate solidarity? Are you Boaz, presented with an opportunity to be kind, to extend beyond conventional compassion, to use your wealth and privilege in an honorable way? Who are you in this story? Or, perhaps have you been more than one of the characters in the arc of your life?

And where is God in the story? Edward Campbell, retired Old Testament professor at McCormick Seminary, says that the book of Ruth is a "tale of human kindness and just dealing far beyond the norm." He answers the "where is God" question this way: "God is not only present throughout, but is indeed the moving force behind all the developments of the story...Naomi, Ruth and Boaz each act as God to each other, by taking extraordinary responsibility and performing extraordinary acts of kindness."

What is it like when we face hardship, and what is it like when we are faced with the opportunity to respond to someone who is suffering? Last Sunday, I told the story of my paternal grandfather, Parker Wilkinson, who was a World War I veteran, and who, as his beloved wife's health deteriorated, cared for her with compassion and tenderness, upholding his marital vows, to be sure, but doing

so in such a way that those memories remain with me. We've all done that – cared for an ailing parent or spouse, journeyed with a child or a friend as they struggled physically or emotionally or spiritually. We've all been Ruth to Naomi, or Boaz to Ruth.

But let's think about the trajectories of Ruth, the ethical and moral implications, the places where the call to compassion takes us. It's been a tough few weeks in the compassion department. People have been sent bombs in the mail. People have been shot and killed because they were black, because they were Jewish, or just because they showed up at a bar to drink a little and to dance a little.

Compassion and kindness are antidotes to fear and hatred, though it feels like fear and hatred are getting the upper hand at the moment. But they can't. They mustn't. Even when their forces are strong, how can we as people of faith, who follow Jesus, who are shaped and formed by the story of Ruth, persevere in acts of kindness, that are never random, but always fueled by the God whose compassion toward us is endless and boundless?

I am not a policy person, but I do think we are called to examine things like guns and immigration through the lens of Ruth, that while policy differences will remain, how can we apply the vision and values of Ruth in our present moment? Not whether, I believe, but how?

Princeton professor Eddie Glaude writes that “The belief that white people matter more than others...has distorted our democratic principles and disfigured the souls of so many Americans...We must confront the abject ugliness that lurks beneath our cherished way of life, because it's now in the open for all to see. These are dark times. And more than ever, we must be the light.” (*Time*, November 1, 2018)

What can be lost in the Ruth story, made sentimental and romantic, is that neither Ruth nor Boaz expressed any fear of the “other,” the “other” in this case being a foreign refugee. “We are measured,” Jill Duffield writes, by “how we treat the widows in our day...A disastrous, tragic ending is avoided due to the goodness of Boaz...Boaz acts righteously and within the customs and

constrictions of the time and demonstrates proper care for widows, the vulnerable of the vulnerable.” Jill then connects some dots: “While our country roils with conflict, division, violence...and deadly acts, the Bible holds us accountable to how we treat the disinherited...The Scriptures require us to examine our hearts, actions and witness in the face of our current context and every shocking headline. Beginning with how we treat the least of these, the systemically oppressed and the situationally vulnerable, no matter who they are.”

There will be times when the vulnerable will be living with cancer, or dementia. There will be times when the vulnerable will be facing addiction or depression. There will be times when the vulnerable lose a job, or have a relationship blow up. There will be other times when the vulnerable are subject to racism, or sexism, or homophobia, or poverty, or tribalism, or religious bigotry, or xenophobia. Or any other response that preys on that very vulnerability.

And whether in the granular intimacy of a personal relationship or the grander stage of culture and society, our call is the very same. Call it what we will – love, compassion, steadfastness, faithfulness, kindness – to be as Ruth and to be as Boaz, to demonstrate with our lives as well as with our words, “where you go, I will go.”

Where you go – to a foreign place, to a terminal illness, to suffering, to injustice and oppression, even to war – where you go, I will go. And there you will find God with you, with us, every step of the way. Amen.