

Sermon for the Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
Reformation Lutheran Church  
October 13, 2019  
Text: Ruth 1:1-17

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Grace and Peace to you From God Our Father and from Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

Unlike the president I do not get to have a lot of “perfect” conversations with people. But what I do get to have on a regular basis as a chaplain for hospice are deep spiritual conversations with people who have never set foot in a church. I remember one of them from a few years ago distinctly. After a young man, a recent college graduate, had lost his father he asked to speak to someone about his struggle. We talked about his relationship with his father, his worried hopes that the doctors had done everything they could to help him, and how he felt both during his father’s final days and in the weeks immediately following the death. But then the conversation turned to religion. Now, understand, when I am talking to someone about their grief I never bring up religion – and you shouldn’t either unless they specifically bring it up. He shared with me that his biggest struggle was wondering what had happened to his father. He shared that he had not been brought up religious and described himself previously as a committed agnostic. But as he was going through all the sadness and yearning and longing that so often marked grief he confessed to me that his heart was torn. “I really want to believe. I mean I want to believe that my dad is living on, I want to believe that he’s looking down on me, I want to believe that I’ll see him again, I want nothing more than to have faith right now.” My training in seminary told me that what I should do right now is witness to him, proclaim Jesus to him. But I did not. The Holy Spirit instead stopped me from the long sermon I was about to give, and all I said was – “You don’t need to reach for faith, in what you told me it’s pretty clear that you already have it.”

I am thankful for the story of Ruth today because she shows me the same things about faith that I learned from that honest and insightful young man those years ago. From Ruth and Naomi we learn two absolutely vital things. First, that faith is nothing less than what you cling to. Second, that faith is not a suspension of disbelief, not an idea you think, and not a leap in the dark. Faith always has a face on it.

Ruth takes place in the time of “the judges” if you’ve been following the last couple of weeks we’ve heard of the Israelites being liberated from Egypt, journeying through the Wilderness, and receiving the law. After entering the promised land the Israelites settled down and were divided up in twelve tribes. There was no king, but Israel remained surrounded by enemies. So the judges were figures who would rise up in times of invasion or crisis to fight the enemies off – there’s a whole book about it right before Ruth. I find it so fascinating that right after all these stories about Israel rising up triumphant against all these enemies – we get a story starring one of these enemies – a Moabite named Ruth.

The story we hear today is often told as one where Ruth is selfless and humble – loyal to her mother in law despite having no ties or reason to still be with her. But it’s important to pay attention to what’s happening in this story. There is a famine in Moab. Naomi hears that back in Israel where she came from there is food. That’s the reason for the journey. I want you to imagine the desperation that Naomi must feel as a widow with two other mouths to feed to take a huge chance and go back to the land that she abandoned years ago hoping that some relative somewhere will forgive her for walking out on her country and actually share resources with her, a poor widow, so she can eat. The fact that she has two foreign widows with her will probably not help her case. So she is partly out of her needs and also wanting what’s best for her daughters in law sending them back home. The sad fact of life until relatively recently in our history was that for most women life could be pretty brutal unless you had a man to take care of you.

Orpah takes her chances and goes back home. But Ruth won’t. Ruth is desperate. Ruth does not want to go back into a land with no food as a widow. She wants to take her chances and be a widow in a land with food rather than be a widow in a land with no food. This is not just a story of Ruth being nice to her mother in law – no matter how hard many of you might find that to be. Ruth is begging to go with Naomi so that she will not starve. Ruth is desperate. These words are not words of affirmation or friendship. These are the words of a desperate and starving woman hoping for a better life. Ruth is a migrant. And Naomi has a green card.

This is not to say that Ruth is not faithful. Ruth pledges not just to journey with Naomi but to follow her to the end. Not knowing what will happen Ruth “clings to” Naomi and vows to follow her all the way to the

grave. This is what faith is. Faith is what you “cling to” when you are desperate. Faith is what you call on when there is nothing else left. Faith is what you hang onto when the storm rages around you. As Luther had it in the catechism faith is “what you fear, love, and trust” and whatever you have faith in and “hang your heart on” is your God. Faith is not about what you can make your brain think, faith is what your heart rests on. And you see it most when you are desperate – when you are stuck in those times of famine in your own life. Maybe it’s living and surviving on these crazy streets, maybe it’s finding something life giving and meaningful to do now that you’re retired, maybe it’s finding strength in the midst of a loved one’s terminal diagnosis even though you’re falling apart, maybe it’s being in your twenties and being sick and tired of everyone asking what you are going to do in your life – whatever your famine – wherever you are desperate – what your heart clings to right there at your most awful, rock bottom, tear and anxiety stained moments – that’s what you have faith in.

For Ruth her heart clung to Naomi. Her faith had a face on it. That’s who she had faith in. The hope that Naomi would take her into Israel and give her a chance at having a new life and at the very least eating. Nothing else matters. “Your people shall be my people, Your God shall be my God.” She’s not “converting” not trading the Moabite gods for the Israelite God because she’s decided that Yahweh is a better or more believable God. She is following Yahweh because she is following Naomi. We simply don’t meet God in a vacuum but encounter God because someone told us about him. Relatives that teach us to pray and sing us hymns, Sunday school teachers that opened to us stories in scripture, neighbors that testify to us about the things God does in their lives, people who show you kindness when you feel like you don’t deserve it, friends that console us and race to be by us when we’re in trouble, pastors who proclaim the word of forgiveness and feed us holy food – man I can keep going on and on. How would we ever meet God or have faith in God unless God showed up in this way constantly every single day. For me this weekend was a very dear friend from seminary who called me to listen to a sermon and talk about it on a Friday night and instantly I was transported to those late night theology conversations in Seminary that I loved so much. God does not hide behind logic puzzles and math problems. God gives us faith by putting a face on it. God gives us faith by all the faces gathered here, and the ones waiting to meet you outside of here.

For that young man so many years ago faith was starting to emerge in his heart because of the face that he was searching for, ignited by the truth that though his father may have died his love for his father did not. Desperate like Ruth that young man reached out begging to for some kind of connection to his father. That young man had faith because he was seeking to hang onto something with a face on it.

And the most important face is the one that looks down on us twisted in agony on the cross. Clinging to us not in our best moments, not all those times we are on a spiritual or a personal high glad that everything is right with the world. Instead Jesus clings to that cross because when he does that he is clinging to us in our desperation, in our times of famine, in our times of heartbreak, in our times of heartbreak, and grief and want. "Where you go, I will go" he says. "Where you die, I will die" he promises. And that is the face that gives us faith – not the face that we cling to, but the face of the crucified and risen one who always clings to us.

Amen