

Rev. Adrienne Meier

August 29, 2021, Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Saint Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Almost Entirely Love

Ruth 1:1-17

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.' Then they wept aloud again.

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, '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!'

The poet Maggie Smith grieved the end of her nearly nineteen-year marriage. It was hard, she writes, "There were days, weeks, when I could hardly get out of bed, hardly eat." But she started to write, beginning, first, with a daily goal, a little affirmation, each one ending

with what was most compelling to her, the phrase, “Keep moving.” One day, she wrote, “Be thankful for your wounds, as strange as that sounds; the ways you’ve been hurt and the ways you’ve faltered make you useful to other people. Empathy is a kind of fellowship; be thankful that your wounds made this togetherness possible. Keep moving.” Empathy is a kind of fellowship - a kind of love available to those who have experienced pain and loss. It isn’t far, I think, from God’s answer to loss. God’s answer to loss and this whole, too-often-broken life, really, is love and more of it. Love and more of it in a community that exists to become entirely love.

Months ago, someone mentioned how hard it will be to be in the sanctuary and see the empty seats of beloved members who are no longer with us. Months ago, we also thought we’d all be back in the sanctuary, able to comfort one another in our grief. Months ago, it seemed the right thing to take a few weeks to talk about and create a space for sorrow, lament, and - perhaps most importantly - hope. That was months ago, and today the need seems all more greater. The losses have not stopped, likely will not stop, and if we do not take the time to name them, to air them out, well, it feels like they might suffocate us. We need space to mourn that we didn’t celebrate Thanksgiving last year with a loved one who didn’t make it to Easter. We need to name the frustration of the funeral we waited for and waited for and waited for and are still waiting for. We absolutely must lay out the loss of confidence we once had in one another. And we must lay out our grief and frustration at still wearing masks, still staying apart, still being afraid for our children. It isn’t just any single loss, it is the layer of loss upon loss upon loss. It isn’t just trauma, but the fact that we are still being traumatized.

Ruth and Naomi faced layer upon layer of loss: famine, death, departures; even their names of the characters are sorrowful. The children born to Elimelech and Naomi—Mahlon and Chilion—their names mean “Sickness” and “Spent.” Before the stories tell us anything that happens, their fates are sealed. The only thing ahead is tragedy. What is to be done in the face of all this loss? Orpah, Naomi’s other daughter-in-law, whose name means “Back of the Neck,” chooses to return to her own family, as if all this loss never happened. She chooses indifference. Naomi, we’ll learn next week, considered bitterness. Her name means “Pleasant,” but when she returns to her ancestral home, she tells everyone to call her Mara, “bitter.” And, to be sure, if bitterness were ever really a viable option, we’d consider it. But the truth is, to be bitter just means more pain. To be bitter is to prefer to relive again and again the moments that wounded us. To be bitter is to award the winning trophy to whatever harmed us. To be bitter is to be stunted; to stop growing. Orpah chose indifference; Naomi danced with bitterness; but Ruth chose love.

Consider her other options. She could have gone home, back to her family, the ones obliged to care for her. She could have lived her life enraged by all that had happened to her. But, instead, she chose to stay—to love, to embrace the fellowship of empathy with the person who knew what she had lost: “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.” In the face of great loss, the only truly viable solution Ruth sees

is to love more, the solution that would give purpose to her days. She may face starvation, but love would give her something to do, someone to care for. We have options, Beloved, but only the intentional choice to love and love more will give us direction.

This is no easy choice. It requires foresight and practice.

To love more is to plan to love. To not leave love for the leftovers. Very often, what we offer to others, especially those who are already at the margins of our lives, at the margins of society, is whatever is leftover. We offer whatever junk we no longer need in our lives, whatever time is available after we've filled our schedules, whatever money is available when we've taken our vacations, fixed up our homes. This isn't a purpose, this is leftovers! Love isn't leftovers; it's the feast. Love isn't the turkey sandwich the day after Thanksgiving—or at least, it isn't *only* that. It is the whole family gathered around a meal lovingly created. To love in this way is to plan to love, to choose to love, to be conscious of our choice to love; to be love with our whole selves.

Hayden Carruth wrote a poem to his wife near the end of his life—it is beautiful in its entirety—but let me offer you just the first dozen or so lines:

So often it has been displayed to us, the hourglass
with its grains of sand drifting down,
not as an object in our world
but as a sign, a symbol, our lives
drifting down grain by grain,
sifting away — I'm sure everyone must
see this emblem somewhere in the mind.
Yet not only our lives drift down. The stuff
of ego with which we began, the mass
in the upper chamber, filters away
as love accumulates below. Now
I am almost entirely love.

When we begin with love, continue in love, end in love, eventually, we ourselves become almost entirely love.

It isn't easy to get there. It takes, practice. Consider this: both Christians and Jews place the book of Ruth immediately after Joshua and Judges. You see, in Joshua and Judges, God authorizes, commands the utter defeat and annihilation of all other cultures in the Promised Land, including the Moabites, Ruth's people. On the heels of a story that would name Ruth as enemy comes a story where a Moabite becomes a Jew, becomes the grandmother of King David, and, in the Christian story, becomes the 28th grandmother of Jesus Christ. The story of Ruth stands in direct contrast to calls for outrage, indifference, injustice, a reminder that the more we practice love, the more love there is.

I find myself touched, envious of the Buddhist practice of lovingkindness meditation. In this meditation, you begin with someone you already love, and you visualize yourself showering them with love. Then, you might move onto someone who you are largely neutral to. Eventually, you might even be able to do this for someone who is an enemy. In the church, it is Communion that is the practice of love, where we gather with those who we are sure are wrong, those who are our enemies, those who are as different from us as the sea is from shore, those whose stories we do not know. We call this meal Communion—a statement of intention that the goal of this meal is to draw us into the fellowship of empathy. We tell the truth at this meal: the world is broken, we are broken, but God has the cure, love. And, by the grace of God alone, we endeavor to become a community that is, now, almost entirely love.

There are days where it seems there are few options offered to us. We can be bitter; we can be indifferent; we can be anguished; we can be outraged. But none of these responses will give intention to our grief. None of these responses can help us make sense of what has happened to us. None of these responses give us purpose these days, and the ones that will follow. But bitterness and indifference and never-ending sorrow and outrage aren't the only option.

The other option is to love more.

After all, Beloved, loving more is the godly solution. We love to make God bitter over the Fall; angry over our sin; frustrated by our brokenness. But Scripture says that is not true, rather, that God “so loved the world.” God’s prescription for a world in which we love and lose; love and leave; love and grieve...God’s prescription is to love more. And so, Beloved, as we began the lifetime’s work of untangling all that has happened to us, let us set out with the intention to love more and to remain in a community whose purpose is become love, entirely.

Amen.