

Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for awhile in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. When she heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughter-in-laws prepared to return home from there. With her two daughter-in-laws she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-laws, "go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters, Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me-even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons-would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughter. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me,, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me. When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

"Fidelity"

Lord, You have been our dwelling place
throughout all generations.

Psalm 90:1

In Ruth's time, 'everybody was doing what was right in their own eyes, and the word of the Lord was rare' (1 Samuel). The Jewish community began wondering if the covenant between God and God's people was over. The spin on why bad things were happening was that God had abandoned the Divine project of making the Hebrew people into a Holy community of God's people. Then along came the non-Jew, Ruth. No mention of whether or not she loved her mother-in-law, or for that matter, her husband Elimelech. All we know about her is that she committed herself to be the life companion to the bitter widowed Jew, Naomi, that Ruth gave birth to Obed (the great grandfather of King David), and that Jesus' lineage is traced back to his house and royal line.

Ruth's story is about how God works through people to grow us up into human beings that reflect the image of God. Self-psychologists tell us that human beings are naturally hardwired to develop a unique sense of self, and a one-of-a-kind identity through our loving relationships with others. They say that we come to understand who and whose we are by imprinting in our minds eye those who are nearest and dearest to us and by letting them occupy a rent free room in our head. They say that this unconscious internalization of the emotional life, teachings, and behavior patterns of loved ones gives us the comfort, guidance, and security necessary for a life-long evolving of a sound sense of self. Pastoral psychologists add another idea to this internalization theory. Specifically, they say that we can form a personalized mental picture of God whom we have never seen by coloring it in with the kind of unconditional acceptance and committed care that we receive from our parents, family, friends, and loved ones. The plus side of this is that when we unconsciously internalize 'good enough' love relationships into our God image they have a positive influence upon shaping our

character, values, and attitudes. In the Biblical sense they help souls bloom into vibrant individuals who are able to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with their God. Conversely, when the energies of distrust, fear, anger, anxiety, shame, and malice seep into our God image they have a negative impact on our evolving personality. The soul becomes parched, the heart becomes hardened, and arthritis of the compassionate spirit sets in.

Ruth's story is about fidelity. It's about how God joined Ruth and Naomi together in the kind of relationship that gave birth to new life and healed Israel's abandoning image of God. Ruth's promise to embittered Naomi was this: "Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you live so shall I live, your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God too." Years later, Gregory Norbet O.S.B. wrote this verse in recognition of that Holy Spirit of Fidelity that he experienced blowing in and through members of his community of faith. With a grateful heart he wrote: "I want to say something to all of you who have become a part of the fabric of my life. The color and texture which you have brought into my being have become a song and I want to sing it forever. There is an energy in us which makes things happen when the paths of other persons touch ours and we have to be there and let it happen. When the time of our particular sunset comes, our thing, our accomplishment won't really matter a great deal. But the clarity and care with which we have loved others will speak of vitality of the great gift of life we have been for each other."

In 'The Only Thing To Do' Rev. Copenhagen commented: "Following Naomi is simply living out one of the givens of life. After all, the two women were thrown together by happenstance. Ruth happened to marry Naomi's son, a marriage that was probably arranged. If there were choices involved, they were made by other people long ago . . . Our fidelity to those we are stuck with is a powerful reminder of the fidelity of a God who is stuck with us. That is why the story of Ruth—a gentile—has an honored place in the Hebrew scriptures. She reminded the Jews of something important about their God. God does not

leave when the going gets tough, when we are as destitute as an ancient Near Eastern widow. God is not committed to us because it is in God's interest, or for any other good reason. Rather, God is committed to us because . . . well, because that's the way God is (Christian Century, Oct. 1994, p. 947).

Family and church friends, today is Grace and Greg's baptismal day. It is the day in which we celebrate the way in which Jesus, God, Spirit anoints us with amazing Love and digs a dwelling place and settles tenaciously forever amen with them and us. In his devotional, 'Our Dwelling Place' Rev. Samuel reflected: I will never forget the last Sunday I worshipped as a member at the church I attended during the three years of my seminary education. The historic Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, Georgia, had become my home away from home, my refuge from the grind of academic rigor, and my place of safety amidst the hazards of theological deconstruction and reconstruction. The pastor had welcomed me, the congregation had embraced me and the Holy Spirit had edified me at Ebenezer. Upon graduation from Emory University's School of Theology I was called to a pastorate, and that meant leaving Ebenezer. On the last Sunday I worshipped at Ebenezer, a senior deacon of the church shook my hand and said to me. "Son, you'll always have a home here at Ebenezer. If you don't like where you're going, you can always just come right back." Those kind sentiments have stayed with me throughout the 34 years I've been away serving my own congregations. And even though the Ebenezer Baptist Church family today has a new church building, a new pastor and many members I do not know, I still feel that I have a home in the gracious spirit of that congregation. When I think about it, a home---a dwelling place----may not necessarily be the place of our address. A dwelling place is an ever-present spirit of 'do-no-harm' hospitality and forgiven affirmation that goes with us wherever we go. A dwelling place is much more than an address. It is God's relentless invitation to every sojourner to "come home" and find rest and restoration for our weary souls. Our location changes from time to time. But isn't it good to know that in Love's Welcoming Embrace, we can always come home?