

Rev Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
October 3, 2021
Ruth 1:1-18

“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask . . . Where Do We Go From Here?”

Today I’m concluding my sermon series “I’ve Been Meaning to Ask”. I’ve said from the beginning that I wanted to do this series because I believe we’ve lost our ability to listen to one another, especially people with whom we don’t see eye to eye. And folks, if there’s anything our society needs right now, it’s the ability to listen. We just don’t listen to one another; and when I say we, I really mean we! We’re all guilty of this! We don’t listen to people we don’t like, we tune out people who don’t agree with us, we think we have a corner on the truth and everyone else is wrong, and we increasingly live in our own echo chambers.

So “Where do we go from here?” This is the last question we’re asking. *Where do we go from here?* I cannot think of a better day to explore this question than today, when we are all together on World Communion Sunday, a day that is all about setting aside what divides us.

World Communion Sunday first started at Shadyside Presbyterian Church in 1933 as a way for the church to counter the pessimism and fears running rampant in the country. The church sought to do something both real and symbolic to oppose all of that. So they conceived of a day when Christians would gather around the Lord’s Table in a show of unity to defy the pessimism and walls that were dividing them.

The idea caught on, and in 1940 WCS was endorsed by the National Council of Churches.

Personally, I think it’s one of the better ideas to spring from a Presbyterian Church, or any church, for that matter. We need the reminder that there’s unity. We need the reminder that God’s will for creation is peace and harmony. We need the reminder that there is room for everyone at the table. Christ invites everyone to pull up a chair and sit down because God delights in diversity.

And yet, with few exceptions, society prizes conformity . . .and the Church seems more than willing to go along with it.

In 1955, Donald McGavran of Fuller Seminary published the book The Bridges of God, in which he set forth the idea of the “homogeneous unit principle”. That principle says that if you expect a church to grow and people to convert to Christianity, you must appeal to a common denominator around which they can gather, such as ethnicity, language, level of education, and so on. McGavran wrote:

“People become Christian fastest when least change of race or clan is involved. It takes no great acumen to see that when marked differences of color, stature, income, cleanliness, and education are present, men understand the Gospel better when expounded by their own kind of people. They prefer to join churches whose members look, talk, and act like themselves.”

When I first read that, I cringed . . .I still do cringe! Until I realized that it’s true. If it weren’t, then why do so many churches lack diversity of color, thought, or socio-economic status? Now, to be fair, McGavran didn’t necessarily see this as how things ought to be, but rather that the homogeneous unit principle is a reasonable concession to human nature. You know, birds of a feather flock together, and all that stuff.

But God in Christ calls us to spread our wings, and hang out with people whose feathers sport different colors than our own.

Two women who chose to hang out with one another even though their colors didn’t match were Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. Ten years prior to our story opening, the story you heard Carrie and Rev. An read, Naomi and her husband had fled to Moab to escape a famine in Bethlehem. They had two sons, both of whom married women (Ruth and Orpah) from Moab. But when our story opens the men are dead and the women are left to fend for themselves. Naomi urges her two daughters-in-law to return to their mother’s homes and find new husbands. Orpah obeys. But Ruth doesn’t; in fact, she clings to Naomi.

Now the important thing to know here is that the Moabites, Ruth’s ancestors, were bitter enemies with the Israelites, Naomi’s ancestors. In fact, the hatred

between these two groups is so great that in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah the Israelites are forbidden to marry anyone from Moab, and the book of Deuteronomy refers to the people of Moab as unclean. And even the book of Ruth always refers to Ruth as Ruth the Moabite, therefore constantly reminding us that Ruth is the outsider, our enemy.

All of this means that Ruth is a very unlikely companion for Naomi. She's an outsider, a woman, a widow and most importantly, an enemy of Israel. Is it any wonder Naomi tells her to go home? Naomi saw Ruth for what she was: a liability. "Turn back," Naomi says to her twice. *Turn back.*

But Ruth refuses:

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.

You might recognize these words from weddings you've attended. But they're uttered in a situation that could not be more unlike a wedding. One might even say that it is precisely the lack of a wedding that produces Ruth's speech. For all intents and purposes, Ruth should have left Naomi. But she didn't. She chose to stay. The outsider is the faithful one.

Here is God, working through Ruth and her unquestionable loyalty to Naomi, proclaiming to the world that God is the God of all people – the God of the lowly and widow, and the God of the stranger and enemy. How amazing is it that God works through the enemy, the one we perceive to be the outsider, the one we'd rather not listen to let alone hang out with, thank you very much. And yet this is precisely the person with whom God works.

Perhaps when we consider the question "Where do we go from here" we ought to consider that God who speaks and acts through Ruth; that God shows us that loyalty can come from unexpected places, and friendships can arise with people we'd never expect.

Friends, wouldn't it be something if the Church – the church with a Capital C but also this church – wouldn't it be something if we were known for subverting boundaries rather than drawing them? Or, as someone else once said, "wouldn't it be something if we started to measure ourselves by whom we include rather than whom we exclude?" (John Buchanan, "To Dwell in Perfect Unity", October 1, 2006)

Wouldn't it be something?

The same person who asked that question also wrote (and I couldn't agree more):

"In the Bible, the unity of the church is based not on everyone agreeing, singing from the same hymnal, reciting the same creed, worshiping in the same style, but on God's love for all." Ruth reminds us of this and more.

And World Communion Sunday is a reminder of this.

But World Communion Sunday is also a reminder to us as to how far we have to go to achieve unity not only despite our differences, but also in celebration of our differences. There's an old Japanese proverb that says: "the nail that sticks out gets hammered down." Can we live with a protruding nail, as hard that sounds? Can we learn to live with it, as Christ – our Savior who is so very familiar with nails – calls us to do?

Friends, I don't know if there's a more pressing question for our day and age than that one because everywhere we turn, we see people verbally attacking another person because of differences.

Here's the thing . . . I know we can reach across boundaries of nation, ethnicity, language, gender, race, and theology because we're doing it now, in this space! So we can do it! But can we do it every other day of the week, too, when we need to work across boundaries of vaccination status and masks? Or will we live with that homogeneous unit principle, because it's easier, and it's what makes us comfortable?

I want to close with a story, told by a minister – a true story – about a time he served one summer at a little church in Scotland. Another minister there

befriended him, a man by the name of Johnny Dunlop. Johnny shared with him a story about something that happened in his life, a story that made him realize how important this reaching across differences things really is, because sometimes it's a matter of life and death.

Johnny was in the infantry in the British Army in World War II. His unit was surrounded, and he was captured and ended up in a prisoner of war camp in Poland. It was dreadful: cold, wet, filthy, and worst of all, there was almost no food, just a bowl of thin soup and a scrap of bread once a day. Prisoners lost weight, until they were skin and bones, contracted diseases, and began to die.

The war was not going very well for the Allies, and there didn't seem to be any reason for hope. But as the tide began to turn and Germany's fortunes diminished, the conditions in the POW camp became even worse, until some prisoners didn't want to go on living. One easy way to end it all was to throw yourself against the barbed wire fence as if trying to escape and be shot instantly by the guards. Johnny said that one night, deeply discouraged, depressed, and sick with despair and hunger, he slipped out of the barracks and walked toward the fence, not quite sure whether he ought simply to end it all. He sat down on the bare ground thinking. He sensed movement in the dark on the other side of the barbed wire. It was a Polish farmer. He had half a potato in his hand. He thrust the potato through the barbed wire. As Johnny Dunlop took it, the man said, in heavily accented English, "The Body of Christ." (John Buchanan, "Shared Meal", Christian Century Magazine, September 26, 2013)

Where do we go from here?

God couldn't make it any clearer: where you go, I will go – says Ruth who shows us it is possible to work across the deep lines that divide us and maybe even become friends with people we'd never, ever have expected.

1

Amen.

