

“A Determined Spirit”
Ruth 1:15-18/Matthew 1:1-6

In May of my junior year in high school, a friend told me about an opening for a second lifeguard at a neighborhood pool. He had worked there the previous summer and would again that year. He spoke of the fun he had and how easy it was, assuring me if I wanted the job it was mine as he was also the pool manager. It sounded enticing. I had the certification needed, could get a tan while working and the pay was especially appealing as the minimum wage had just been raised to \$2.10 an hour. What wasn't to like? I accepted, turning down another offer to be a bank teller. My family was going on vacation right after school ended, so I said he would need to work alone that first week, but I was free the rest of the summer. That suited him just fine.

When we returned from our trip, I called to ask him about the work schedule and there was this long pause. “Well,” he said “I guess you can work *this* week.” “What do you mean?” He then told me that the budget wouldn't allow for a second lifeguard and thus I didn't have a job after all. He did pay me for a few days of work and whether sour grapes or not, I decided about the third day I would have been bored silly as a lifeguard the entire summer. Yet as I look back that experience taught me something about commitment in multiple ways. For not only had my friend broken his promise to me, but I had already accepted the bank job only to back out when this other opportunity opened up at the pool. When I called the bank that second week of June, their job, of course, was already filled, giving me an important lesson in honoring one's word.

The same can be said of the text before us this morning. Those verses offer a continuation of the narrative we began last Sunday, and in the passage before us today we hear the most familiar words in that entire work; a memorable example of commitment.

As we recalled in starting our reflection on the book bearing her name, Ruth's husband, father-in-law and brother-in-law all had died. Along with the widow of her brother-in-law, Ruth set out on with their mother-in-law, Naomi, back to her home country. It was a risky move for the younger women as they would be foreigners in a land where the faithful were taught to avoid their kind. The possibility of re-marriage was far better if they stayed in Moab, yet when Naomi said she was returning to Bethlehem, Ruth and Orpah declared they were going, too. Twice, Naomi sought to dissuade them. After the first, both young women tearfully said “No, we will return with you to your people.” After the second, Orpah reluctantly agreed to go back to her home country. Ruth stayed with her mother-in-law.

Our text begins at that moment when, for a third time, Naomi tries to change Ruth's mind. “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!” Ruth begins. The English translation doesn't fully capture her determination. The exclamation point at the end of that sentence in our Pew Bible gives a hint as to her passion, for the word translated as “leave” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament for times when Israel had forsaken God's commands. Ruth isn't gently asking Naomi to stop encouraging her return to Moab, but in essence, indignantly says to her mother-in-law “I can't believe you want me to abandon you!”

Ruth continues with memorable words: “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!” They are moving words of commitment from that young women, ones often read at weddings today, but in the moment they are first spoken there is no response. Instead, our text

simply concludes “When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.” Events proceed as the two go on to Bethlehem, but we stop at that point of silence.

As one of the mysteries in the scene is what led both women to respond as they did. We don’t know for instance, why Ruth would make such a dramatic commitment. One of my seminary professors suggested that perhaps Ruth’s family had rejected her for marrying a Jewish man or that they were in such dire straits that feeding another mouth was a burden they wouldn’t accept or that Ruth knew there were no marriage prospects in Moab and thus had nothing to lose in returning with Naomi. We aren’t told. (Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob, *Ruth: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999, p. 34)

Nor do we know what was going through Naomi’s mind upon seeing that Ruth would not be deterred. Was she grateful and thus left silent by the magnitude of Ruth’s gift? Was she resentful that Ruth would not let her go home without the burden of a daughter-in-law from Moab? I’m more inclined to the latter view for as the narrative continues and the two women arrive in Bethlehem Naomi laments to neighbors about all that has happened and completely ignores the fact that Ruth is still with her. Still, we don’t know what that mother-in-law thought.

Yet what we clearly have in Ruth’s response is a glimpse of a determined young woman who chooses a path that was a complete surprise for that era. The Biblical scholar Phyllis Tribble puts it this way: “A young woman has committed herself to the life of an old woman rather than search for a husband...One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men. There is no more radical decision in all the memories of Israel. Naomi is silenced by it.” (Phyllis Tribble recalled by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky in *The JPC Bible Commentary: Ruth*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2011, p. 22).

Exceptionally generous acts today can have the same impact.

Twenty years ago, Oklahoma State University football coach Bob Simmons received a kidney transplant. He had known his blood-filtering organs were failing, but it wasn't until a week before the surgery that his wife and he told their three children that he was receiving a new kidney and that their mother was the donor. Linda Simmons is a nurse and had been thinking about making that gift for months. The previous year, she had turned to God in prayer "Lord, I need to know an answer," she said "Please let me know if this is what you want me to do." She heard a voice in her head and outside that said "Yes, give your husband one of your kidneys." She was led to read [a verse in Scripture that concludes] "I will uphold you with my victorious right hand" [and] "felt enveloped in peace. All her life, Linda Simmons had been a believer, but never had her faith grabbed her so deeply. She tingled, she felt that right hand lift her and hold up over the rug, next to the bed. 'As if I'd been elevated off the floor,'" is how she described it.

Bob resisted the idea at first. On hearing the news their oldest and youngest child took it calmly while their middle son was sure it would result in both of his parents dying. Linda was undeterred. A *Sports Illustrated* article at the time shared the outcome. "Bob returned to practice 11 days later," S.L. Price wrote "But what struck outsiders most was Linda's sacrifice; the donor's recovery is always tougher, and it took months before she returned to normal... Brandon [the oldest son] heard stories about spouses refusing to donate to spouses. 'That's what people should get excited about,' Brandon says. 'What Mom did should be the norm.' Linda might deny that," the journalist continued "People *should* get excited about what has happened to the Simmons family, she believes, because it happened for a reason. 'If you leave out God,' 'Linda said, "'you have no story.'" (S.L. Price, "The Gift," *Sports Illustrated*, July 6, 1998, 78-87)

Ruth revealed that truth in her response long ago, too, even though there is no reason to believe that she knew anything about God other than what she had witnessed in her Jewish

husband and his family. Christians honor her as the great-grandmother of King David and thus an ancestor of Jesus, too; one of four women named in that genealogy we read from Matthew a few minutes ago. Yet within Judaism, Ruth has significance beyond the fact of one descendant.

As Ruth is viewed as the paradigmatic example of conversion. There was no formal model for someone to become a Jew in her day, but Naomi's three-fold attempt to dissuade Ruth remains the model for how converts to Judaism are approached today as rabbis in particular branches of that faith will reject a request for conversion three times. Ruth is also lifted up as a model of faithfulness equivalent to Abraham who went from his home to the place that became the Promised Land. Yet unlike that man who became the one figure claimed by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, Ruth went without a specific revelation from God or a word of blessing.

There is much about Ruth to celebrate and in the coming weeks we will recall other attributes that make her story a key part of Scripture, but on this day we give thanks for her determined spirit and appropriately stop to remember people like that for us.

Who are the ones who refused to give up on you when others did? Who are the people who patiently listened to all of your arguments as to why they should not accompany you, but did not step aside? Who are the individuals who have enriched your life beyond measure and did so even though there were moments when like Naomi, you tried to make them turn back?

I can't answer those questions, of course, but it is such individuals that Ruth embodies and such a characteristic that I believe we are called to emulate.

John Killinger is an Episcopal priest and writer. In one of his books, he spoke about the days of the great western cattle ranches. "A little burro," he writes, "sometimes would be harnessed to a wild steed. Bucking and raging...the two would be turned loose...to proceed out onto the desert range. They could be seen disappearing over the horizon, the great steed dragging that little burro along and throwing him about like a bag of cream puffs. They might be gone for days, but eventually they would come back. The little burro would be seen first, trotting back across the horizon, leading the submissive steed in tow. Somewhere out there on the rim of the world that steed would become exhausted from trying to get rid of the burro, and in that moment, the burro would take mastery and become the leader. And that's the way it is with the kingdom and its heroes, isn't it" Killinger asks "The battle is to the determined, not to the outraged; to the committed, not to those who are merely dramatic." (*Leadership*, Summer Quarter @1992, p. 43)

A woman named Ruth revealed that truth and on this day we celebrate her determined spirit even as we pray that God will share that same gift with someone else through us.