November 4, 2018

Ruth 1:1-18

Through the Eyes of the Saints

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Ruth 1:1-18 New Revised Standard Version

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 the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and 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 considered 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!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Every year November 1st is officially All Saints Day. We celebrate it as a church on the first Sunday in November. We celebrate those who have finished their life on earth and are the cloud of witnesses that surround us. We call them the communion of the saints. We are invited to light candles, say their names, and share their stories about why they meant so much to us. We remember the faces of teachers and coaches and pastors and parents and grandparents and brothers and uncles and aunts and friends and others who have loved us and invested in our lives and taught us how life is to be lived because none of us got to this place in our life alone.

Who are the saints in your life that have shaped you and your faith? I always think of my Grandpa Nicholls. He moved into our neighborhood when I was in 7th grade and by living so close to us, he become a huge part of my life. I remember standing next to him one Sunday in worship and he was holding the hymnal and not singing. I told him to sing and he said, I want to listen to you sing. So, I sang and he smiled. Later, I heard him sing and although I believe theoretically everyone can sing, I can maybe say that it was not his gift.

I think about the saints who made sacrifices that we might have this place to worship, this beautifully intimate sanctuary. This church gathered for worship for the first time one month before Pearl Harbor. All during World War II, this church family saved so that in 1946 they could break ground on this church building. I think of saints who surrounded us in love and taught us Sunday school class or lead Vacation Bible School. Saints like Russell Faulhaber’s dad who would come every Saturday and check the air conditioning units here at the church. He would put water in them or Freon, whatever was needed.

What would you say about the saints in your life? Maybe you would say that she wrote the sweetest notes to you when you needed encouragement. Or he had the best hugs in the church. He always smiled when he was singing in the choir or she always forgave me when I messed up. He loved God and everybody knew it. Or she was so full of wisdom and willing to share it with me. Maybe you would say, he sacrificed so much to make sure that I had a future. They were people who believed in us, even when we didn’t.

Today we remember Audrey Graham. Audrey loved this place, it was her home. The last few times Audrey came to church, I wasn’t sure physically how she did it, but she sat in this sanctuary and listened to Robert play the piano, and was at peace. Audrey experienced God in this place. Audrey did not believe in sugarcoating anything. She told it like it is. I remember when I first met her she was writing thank you notes to people from this church who had brought her casseroles when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. I said how wonderful it was that she had beaten her cancer and she looked at me and told me that she would die from her breast cancer. She had the bad kind. Audrey wanted her young son to know that this church would always be his home. I have never seen a prouder mom than the day that her son was Confirmed and joined this church.

Today we remember Gayle Terry and Shirley Tenery, moms who loved their children and would do anything for them.

Today we remember Dana Allen. Dana loved her daughter Teal and as her heart declined she kept fighting for these last three and a half years to see her beloved Teal grow up more. Life for Dana was about creating beauty. She created it in her marriage with her husband Jeffrey and in her daughter Teal. Last spring Dana and I talked about heaven. Dana said that when she thought about heaven she imagined a green valley, with the warmth of the sun. As she shared with me, I kept imagining stained glass, with the colors and the way that the light shines through. As we were planning Dana’s memorial service, I asked her husband Jeffrey if he and Dana had ever created art together. He whipped out his phone and showed me a picture of stained glass, and right in the middle I saw a piece of green glass that was a valley. Dana is home, in the green valley with the warmth of the sun.

This Sunday and next we are going to be talking about the book of Ruth. It is one of two books of the Bible with titles of women’s names, Ruth and Esther. I encourage you this week to read the entire book of Ruth, it is only four chapters. Today, we hear the beginning of the story. READ SCRIPTURE.

This is a story about family, about what we will do for our loved ones. How far will we go to show the love of God? This week there was a story about the medical team who cared for the person who killed eleven worshippers last Saturday at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. The hospital president, Dr. Jeff Cohen, is Jewish and a member of the Tree of Life synagogue. He shared that as the perpetrator was led into the emergency room he was still shouting hateful things about Jews and the first three people who took care of him were Jewish. Dr. Cohen said, “My job isn’t to judge him, my job is to care for him.” What will we do because of our faith? What do the saints teach us about how to live because of our faith?

Ruth and Naomi are a young woman and her mother-in-law. They both experienced grief in the death of their husbands. They had experienced hunger and famine. After all this tragedy, Naomi expected Ruth to go back to her homeland, to her people. But Ruth embraced Naomi and held on. Ruth says to Naomi, “Where you go, I go; and where you live, I’ll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I’ll die, and that’s where I’ll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!” (Common English Bible)

Ruth stays with her mother-in-law instead of seeking the safety of returning to her own people. Ruth was showing love and loyalty over and beyond what was considered normal or expected. Ruth acts out of loyalty and love, not by logic. Through love and loyalty, Ruth creates her family. Ruth chooses the family and the community that she wants to belong to. It is where she finds hope and peace. All of us in this place have chosen this faith community. We have chosen this faith family. We do so for a variety of reasons, but in this place we find a place where we can grow in our faith and where we feel the love of God. May we all grow in love – love for one another, love for God, and love for our neighbor.

Today we give thanks for the gift of our loved ones, those who have made the earthly journey brighter, fuller, richer, deeper, better. We thank God for saints in the faith, those who have shared the love of God with others. They have shared their witness and we are grateful.