

*God of Love, bless our diversity and similarity. Strengthen us to cherish and adore the uniqueness of each of us. And infuse each of us with your grace to know your transformative love. Amen.*

June 3, 2018 – Ruth 1:16-17  
**“Love Is Love Is Love Is Love”**

Today’s text is familiar to many people. It is one of the most passionate declarations of love and devotion expressed by one person to another in the Bible. So passionate, in fact, that it has been frequently repeated as a vow in traditional wedding ceremonies over the years, most often without any person in the wedding party privy to the knowledge that it was originally spoken by one woman to another.

A vow that concludes with the exclamation, “May God do thus and so to me, and more as well.” Words that would have been accompanied with a hand gesture – a chopping motion on the arm or the side of the neck – to indicate the seriousness of the vow, since swearing by God’s name was forbidden.

In a verse preceding our scripture, in which Ruth comes out to Naomi, describing her true feelings for the woman, we are told that Ruth clung to Naomi. The Hebrew word used to describe this clinging is the very same word used in the book of Genesis to describe the relationship between a man and his wife: the man leaves his parents and clings to the wife, with the two becoming as one flesh. This same sort of clinging that results in one flesh is what Ruth did with Naomi.

This is a lot to take in for some folks. For the uninitiated, it’s hard to imagine that there are positive and affirming examples of same-sex love in the Bible, and that this is one of them. It’s enough to make one throw one’s hands up in the air and shout “hallelujah!” But since we don’t do a whole lot of that sort of thing around here, I’ll move along with the story because there’s even more in store for us.

So what we have are two widows: Naomi, who has lost both her sons to death, and Ruth, who has been left childless. MCC’s Rev. Elder Mona West, in her commentary on the book of Ruth, reminds us there were only two ways a woman could be valued in this society: as an unmarried virgin in her father’s household or as a child-producing wife in her husband’s household. And so things weren’t looking good for either Naomi or Ruth.

But Ruth and Naomi are resourceful and resilient women. When Naomi resolves to return to her homeland, Ruth vows to remain by her side, despite the fact that Naomi is old and Ruth is young; despite the fact that Naomi’s roots are in the nation of Israel, and Ruth is a Moabite; despite the fact that Naomi is Jewish, and Ruth is a Gentile. Despite the fact that the odds were stacked against them, they clung to each other with a fierce love strong enough to resist the norms of their day.

Now, there was a Jewish law designed to protect and care for foreigners, refugees, and the poor. And according to the law, farmers should leave corners of their fields unharvested, they should not pick up that which was dropped, and they should not harvest any overlooked produce that had been forgotten when they harvested the majority of a field. (Lev. 19:9-10) In other words, they were to do a sloppy job of harvesting because that which remained was to be left for the poor and the stranger.

And so Ruth decided to take advantage of this Jewish mandate in order to rustle up some grub for Naomi and herself. And as luck would have it, she ended up in the field of one of Naomi’s relatives. And this is where the story really gets interesting.

The relative, whose name was Boaz, asks one of his servants, “To whom does this young woman belong?” Not an unusual question in a place and time when women were considered to be the property of either their father, their husband, or a slave owner. But the servant’s response was anything but typical. The servant answered Boaz, saying in so many words, she belonged to Naomi. Another woman. Let that sink in for a moment, if you will. Take as long as you need.

Boaz seems to understand the big picture, and so he makes all kinds of provisions for Ruth’s safety and welfare, ensuring that young men don’t harass or violate her and providing water for her when she gets thirsty. “Why?” she asks. And in response, he acknowledges and affirms the relationship between Ruth and Naomi, and even invokes God’s blessing upon it.

Boaz understands where Ruth’s love lies, saying, “You have not gone after young men, whether poor

or rich.” (3:8-9) In other words, “You don’t have to explain anything to me; I get it.” And so what we see beginning to take shape between Boaz, Ruth, and Naomi is an alternative family structure: one which includes not just a husband and wife, but rather, a man and two women. A man who combines his wits with those of Ruth’s and Naomi’s, and together they devise a cunning strategy for him to marry Ruth and give her and Naomi a child, despite the obstacles of the law.

At the story’s end (4.13-22), the townswomen acknowledge Ruth’s love for Naomi and they make the outrageous statement that Ruth is more to Naomi than seven sons! And to top all this off, in celebration of the biological child of Ruth and Boaz, the townswomen proclaim, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ Not to Ruth, but to Naomi, an acknowledgment of the role of Naomi in this triad. Ruth, in bearing a child with Boaz, has given life to Naomi, a woman who, up until this point, was without a husband and without sons, and consequently without a reason for living.

The story of Ruth is one which breaks all the rules. And it does so with God’s blessing. In fact, this biracial son of Ruth and Boaz and Naomi was destined to be the grandfather of King David and the ancestor of Jesus Christ.

If you’ve heard this story before, you probably heard it from a somewhat different perspective than the one I have shared this morning. If it’s portrayed as a love story at all, the only love that’s usually mentioned is that between Ruth and Boaz. Ruth is depicted as self-sacrificing and obedient when it comes to her mother-in-law, and Boaz is compassionate and merciful to Ruth and Naomi, a regular knight in shining armor who saves the day, with everyone living happily ever after.

But I believe it’s more than that. When Ruth comes out to Naomi, proclaiming her love, she does so with a fierce passion. Rev. Elder West says Ruth’s words are “pronouncement, blessing, creed, hymn, poem and declaration.” There is no holding back with her words, no hesitancy. She provides a model for LGBTQ people, encouraging us to fearlessly live into our authentic selves and declare our love, without the need for approval or permission from others.

The story offers strategies for survival. Ruth and Naomi find themselves in a hostile environment, living off the scraps and leftovers of others. As women living within a patriarchal society, they are vulnerable to physical violence. But Boaz uses his privileged status to care for them. Those of us within the LGBTQ community who are privileged – those who are white, male, able-bodied, educated, and possess economic resources – we are obliged to care for and look after those in our community who are less privileged. It’s our responsibility to speak up, speak out, and work for the equal rights of our siblings.

Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz create a family unit that goes against the norm. Rev. Elder West points out, “[Their] actions are similar to the ways in which Queer people of today create families: a bisexual man and two lesbians live together with their biological child; a gay man is a sperm donor for a lesbian couple and is part of the parenting of their child; three gay men live together as lovers and family for twenty years; a lesbian mother and her lover live two doors down from their lesbian daughter and her lover.” (The Queer Bible Commentary, p. 193) Inspired by the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, LGBTQ people are given permission to live and think outside the binary box of sexuality and to color outside the lines of tradition.

After Ruth and Boaz decide to marry, Boaz remembers that there is someone who is more closely related to Naomi who, according to the law, had the right and obligation to be the groom instead of Boaz. Our trio had to navigate and manipulate the law in order to overcome the barriers to their situation. And they would have been proud of today’s LGBTQ community who has become experts at the same thing.

And finally, the townswomen in the story give testimony to God’s approval of the relationship, reminding Ruth and Naomi that God did not abandon them and never will. LGBTQ people must never forget this. We must never forget that the laws of the land are not a reflection of God’s love for us and God’s blessing upon our relationships.

And if we ever need encouragement, we need look no further than our ancient spiritual ancestors, Ruth and Naomi, who knew that love is love is love. Amen.