

Where You Go, I Will Go  
Ruth 1:16-17  
October 22, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

A few weeks ago, I told you about the lovely wedding I officiated on Church Island, with the string quartet sitting in the bushes, and the bride's beautiful lace dress protected from the dirt by a burlap runner. I believe I mentioned that the couple wrote their own vows, and of course – like every bride and groom I have ever worked with – they built their vows in part on the passage from Ruth that we just heard. The bride said, "Steven, I give myself to be your wife. I promise to love and cherish you, in joy and in sorrow, to be your partner and best friend. I vow to make your dreams my own, so that we may fill our days together with happiness. All that I have I offer you, wherever you go I will be with you, and wherever you stay will be our home. Today and always, I choose you to be my partner for life." Then Steven made exactly the same promise to her.

It's beautiful, isn't it? "Wherever you go I will be with you, and wherever you stay will be our home. I choose you to be my partner for life."

This is such a perfect articulation of the joyful, hope-filled, utter commitment that a bride and groom make to one another, that we tend to forget the context in which these lines were originally said. So, let's remind ourselves of the story.

Long, long ago, before Israel had a king or lost its way, when judges ruled the land, there was a famine in Bethlehem. And so, fleeing starvation, a man named Elimelech takes his whole family around the Dead Sea to the land of Moab. It is a journey of about 50 miles, a week or more of walking over rugged and steep terrain. With Elimelech are his wife Naomi and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Together, they settle in Moab, and the sons each abduct wives from the community in which they are settled. The wives are Orpah and Ruth, Moabite women, kidnapped into marriages that neither they, nor even their parents, consent to. This story doesn't sound very much like a lovely wedding on Church Island, does it?

Soon, all the men in this story die. Elimelech and Mahlon and Chilion are no more, and the women in this story face a terrible future – Naomi, most of all, because she is too old to remarry, and the world she lives in provides no protection or even means of subsistence for a woman outside of the care of a husband or sons. Naomi has no future. She is bereft. She changes her name to Mara, which means "bitter." She has nothing left and will surely die.

The two daughters-in-law are also in bad straits, but their lot is not quite so desperate as Naomi's. They are still young enough to bear children. They can return to their mothers and find new husbands, Moabite husbands who will provide for them. Orpah and Ruth have some reason to hope in the future, even if they cannot see it clearly.

Now, Naomi hears that the famine in Bethlehem has ended, so she begins the journey back to her ancestral home. Orpah and Ruth try to go with her, but Naomi says no. Stay here. Find new husbands. Have a life. Don't follow me into my own bleak future. Crying, Orpah kisses Naomi and returns to the home of her mother as Naomi has said. But Ruth remains, and she commits herself to a life with Naomi, to share the bleak future that Naomi faces, one impoverished widow committing herself to another impoverished widow. I will not leave you to face life alone, especially now. Where you go, I will go. 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 will I be buried. May the Lord do thus to me and even more as well if even death parts me from you.

Well! That REALLY doesn't sound like a lovely wedding on Church Island, complete with string quartet!

Ruth had been kidnapped into marriage with Naomi's son. She had no choice, no agency, in that relationship. Now, she finally has an opportunity to make a choice of her own, to shape her own future, and this is the choice she makes; this is the relationship to which she commits herself. She will be faithful to Naomi, who has no future apart from the one that they can build together.

"Wherever you go I will be with you," the beautiful bride says, "and wherever you stay will be our home. I choose you to be my partner for life."

This story actually has a happy ending, for both Ruth and Naomi. Back in Bethlehem, Ruth shows herself to be a person of good, old-fashioned values – hard work, respect for elders – and she finds and marries an established older farmer, Boaz, who provides a home for both Ruth and Naomi. Ruth bears a son, Obed, who becomes the grandfather of the great King David, and through him, Ruth is the ancestor of Jesus, who is born in Bethlehem a thousand years later.

But the happy ending is not the point of this story. The crux is the promise that Ruth makes to Naomi, the moment she casts her lot with her mother-in-law, and throws herself into their shared future.

In this story, Ruth is the face and voice of God. She isn't the savior you might expect. She is a foreigner, a woman, a poor immigrant in Bethlehem, a culture that disdains intercultural marriages. And she demonstrates God's own covenant faithfulness to Naomi – giving herself beyond all measure to the underdog, the powerless one, the one who is bitter even at God.

It has never been easy to live in Israel – not in Ruth's time, not in Jesus' time, and certainly not today. It is a dangerous business to live there, always on the edge of survival, dwelling in the cross roads between mighty nations, sitting on land that someone else wants. In such a place, people have always fallen by the wayside, with no hope on their own. God is committed to those who have nothing, and to each of us when we are bereft, to anyone who is without hope for tomorrow. The promise Ruth makes to Naomi is God's promise to each of us, even in the bitterest of times.

We can count on God's covenant faithfulness to us when we need it most. "All that I have I offer you. Wherever you go I will be with you, and wherever you stay will be our home. Today and always, I choose you to be my partner for life." It is a joyful, hope-filled articulation of utter commitment. God chooses us. God walks with us on the journey, and God will always find a way from wherever we are. From whatever mess we have got ourselves into, from whatever life has thrown at us, God will find a way from there to the place that is home.

Amen