



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094
(920)261-2570
A Stephen Ministry Congregation
www.goodshepherdwi.org

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost October 9, 2016

“Hold On To The Good”

(Ruth 1:16-17)

Rev. David K. Groth

“Ruth replied, ‘Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and 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 I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me” (Ruth 1:16-17).

COLLECT: Almighty God, You show mercy to Your people in all their troubles. Grant us always to recognize Your goodness, give thanks for Your compassion, and praise Your holy name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

This particular story in the Bible is a masterpiece, a little jewel. It's about how God uses the small, seemingly mundane details of our lives for his own purpose.

Naomi and her husband Elimelech, live in Israel, Bethlehem in fact. But then famine breaks out and life in Israel becomes precarious. They decide to pack up and move across the border into Gentile territory . . . into Moab where things aren't so bad. As immigrants, they actually thrive there in Moab. They have two sons, and those sons marry young women, Orpah and Ruth. Orpah and Ruth are not Jewish racially or religiously. They are Moabites, one of the tribes of the Canaanites. But the two young brides convert to Judaism, and the family embraces them.

Then things begin to unravel. Elimelech dies. Then his two sons die, the husbands of Orpah and Ruth. Now we only have these three widows left, the elderly mother-in-law (Naomi) who is living in a foreign land, with her two widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

At that time, a widow was in trouble. By law, the closest relative of the deceased husband is responsible for the widow's welfare and protection. But Naomi has no one. She cannot work, and there's no government sponsored safety net. She's in serious trouble. Even though years have passed since she left Bethlehem (and no one will much remember her anymore), nevertheless she believes her odds will be better among her own people. And so she decides to go back to Israel, back to Bethlehem, her home town, and hope for the best. Maybe one of her neighbors will have mercy on her.

Naomi is old. It isn't likely she will marry again. Orpah and Ruth, on the other hand, though widows too, are

still young. They're not from Bethlehem. They're not even Jewish by race. Their chances of remarrying are much better if they stay in Moab among their own people. So Naomi tells them, "Don't come with me. Go back to your families, your culture, go back to Moab and look for husbands there. There's nothing left for you with me. Go home and get a new start."

Orpah sees the sense in Naomi's words and kisses her mother-in-law good-bye. Orpah went back to her people the text says "and to her gods" (1:15). Orpah *had* believed in Yahweh, but in going back she was renouncing her faith in the God of Israel. That's the last we ever hear of Orpah.

Ruth, on the other hand, refuses. Ruth feels an unswerving and selfless devotion to her desolate mother-in-law Naomi. She will not abandon Naomi. Four times, Naomi urges Ruth, *commands* Ruth to go home. Four times, Ruth will have none of it. Ruth is young and strong and feels responsible for her elderly mother-in-law, Naomi. And Ruth also refuses to renounce her faith like Orpah had. Ruth's final answer to Naomi is pure poetry. "Don't urge me to leave . . . For where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people. Your God shall be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. May Yahweh deal with me ever so severely if anything but death parts me from you."

This is such a wonderful, compact little book in the Old Testament. In fact, if the Packers can't get their offense rolling tonight, just turn the T.V. off and find the family Bible and read the book of Ruth. It's only six pages long. It's near the front of the Old Testament, tucked in between Judges and 1 Samuel where hardly anybody can find it.

Naomi and Ruth, both widows, return to Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem. Ruth, the daughter-in-law, takes care of Naomi by following the field hands during harvest and picking up what they accidentally leave behind. She's like a Sandhill crane out there gleaned the fields. The owner of the fields, a good man named Boaz, sees her plight and tells his workers to leave plenty of unpicked grain for

Ruth. Naomi watches this unfold, and also suspects something else is happening and essentially tells Ruth to make her move, which she does, and the rest is, as they say, history. Boaz and Ruth become man and wife. Boaz provides for Ruth *and* Naomi, and takes responsibility for their protection and welfare. Ruth conceives and has a son and they name him Obed. Meanwhile Naomi's life also turns from desolation to delight, from hopeless poverty to prosperity, from bitter loneliness to being the matriarch of a growing family . . . and it all begins when her daughter-in-law Ruth insists on staying true to her convictions, her family, her faith. And that's the book of Ruth. It ends with a list of begetting and begotting . . . Ruth's geneology. But the point of the story should not be lost on us today.

God blesses us when we hold on to the good. God blesses human love when it is selfless, when, in St. Paul's words, "it seeks not its own way." God blesses us when we take responsibility not just for ourselves but also for others. The story itself is the point. God uses the modest, mundane details of modest, mundane people for great purposes that cannot always be seen at the time, particularly by those people living modest, mundane lives. God uses us for his great purposes that we cannot always see or anticipate.

The problem has always been that our little acts of goodness seem to make no difference at all in the world, and are quickly swallowed up in a world that often isn't much interested in the good. How does your individual integrity matter when huge corporations lie to the government, to their own employees, and to stockholders, and to their customers? How does your modest generosity matter when the rich and powerful, perhaps with very selfish motives, make huge contributions to endowments and foundations? How does your faithfulness to God matter when everyone else around you, it seems, could care less? What possible impact could your little acts of mercy and good have in a world where the more violent the movie is, the better profits? What can we do to make a difference in Syria, for instance, where over 400,000 people have died and millions more have been

displaced.

It's so discouraging, isn't it? And yet, God's Word will not allow us to give up or retreat from the world. From the book of Hebrews: "Provoke one another to love and good deeds" (10:24) "Exhort one another every day . . . that none of you may be hardened . . ." (3:13). From 1 Thessalonians, "Always seek to do good to one another and to all." (5:14). From 1 Corinthians: "Be courageous and strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (16:14). And one more from Philipians, "Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever if commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things . . . practice these things" (4:8-9).

The Bible consistently urges us to hold on to the good and to do good, not just in our marriages and in our families, but at work, at church and in our community and nation. And the Bible consistently suggests that your life and mine are used by God for his own purposes . . . that the reason for urging us to be selfless and loyal and good is because that's the stuff God uses to build his kingdom on earth.

It reminds me of some grandparents in this parish who have set aside their own dreams for retirement in order to be full-time parents again to their grandchildren. In my mind, they are heroes. It's not what they were planning on, but it's the right thing to do.

It reminds me of the young men and women who still sign up to serve in the armed forces, and it's not just for the adventure or the benefits, but because they genuinely desire to serve their country and defend it from those who would destroy it if they could. And it reminds me of those men and women who serve in law enforcement, who don't run from but to the dangerous and the disorderly and the tragic. They are being demonized wholesale as trigger happy racists. But in truth the vast majority are servants of the public good who make up a thin blue line that separates us from anarchy.

It reminds me of the many in our own congregation who, with their discretionary time, choose to coach a team

instead, or teach a Sunday School class, or tutor a child, or serve as a big brother.

We are always impressed by those singular, heroic actions we read about in the news but the demands of everyday integrity and goodness can be just as sacrificial and selfless. There's nothing easy about holding on to the good, through dull, tedious, everyday existence, but just as honorable.

I'm thinking of marriages that are deeply impacted by Alzheimer's disease, and how one spouse keeps on loving and serving the other though there are no promises they will ever be loved again in return.

And I'm thinking of those in the business world who remain true to their convictions when there is no certainty that it will be rewarded, and may, in fact, be reviled as weak or cowardly.

Hold on to the good, as parents to children in good times and not so good times, and then, as often happens, years later, as adult children to your elderly parents. Hold on to the good. That's the stuff God uses to build his kingdom.

And I'm thinking of a young couple I know who learned their unborn baby would probably have Down's syndrome along with a number of other maladies. The doctor tried to explain how the child would be a burden for them, the expense, the heartache, the on-going needs. He reminded them they could terminate the pregnancy. Yet the parents refused to think that way; they refused to think of death as a solution. They remained true to their convictions and renewed their trust in the Lord of life. And today couldn't imagine life without their daughter with special needs.

Hold on to the good just where you are, living quiet, ordinary lives, day after day, carrying on patiently, staying true, living selflessly because that's the stuff God uses to build his kingdom.

That, by the way is how it works out for Ruth. The young widow becomes married again to Boaz, a good and

faithful man from Bethlehem. God gives them a child, a son whom they name Obed. And Obed will marry and have a son whose name is Jesse, and Jesse will marry and have a son whose name is David, and David will become the king, a great king, from whose house and lineage, the King of kings, would be born, Jesus in Bethlehem. Imagine, none other than Ruth, a Moabite from among the Canaanites . . . none other than Ruth would become the ancestress of our Savior whose name is Jesus. Participation in the kingdom of God is not determined by blood or birth, but, as Paul wrote, “by the obedience that comes from faith” (Rom. 1:5).

One last thing: Ruth’s unswerving and selfless devotion to Naomi points to the unswerving and selfless devotion of God in Jesus Christ. In Christ Jesus, more specifically in the promises of Holy Baptism, God has said to us, where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. In Baptism, God has said, ‘I am going to be by your side through good times and bad. Don’t urge me to leave, because I’m not going to. There is nothing you can say or do that will frighten me away. Nothing can separate you from my love.’ And he stands by that promise. He’s unbending in that way.

So, go out with courage and faith and trust. Hold on to the good. Stay true to your Christian convictions and carry on patiently, faithfully and selflessly. Because God will use all that, and you never know what might come of it. Amen.

