

The Company We Keep
Sermon on Ruth 1:1-18 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, November 5, 2006

In a sign that I probably internalized too much conventional wisdom as a teenager, I always sought to be friends with the most respectable people. To the best of my knowledge, my friends all attended church or synagogue. I was part of the debate team and the Boy Scouts and the National Honor Society. I loved it when a friend of our family called us “good people.” Perhaps I was haunted by this warning in Dolly Parton’s song: I think you’re an angel / But folks think that you’re cheap / Cause you’re known by the company you keep. Why, then, do I know so many of the lyrics to the song, “I’ve Got Friends in Low Places”?

While the Bible doesn’t buy into conventional wisdom or middle class mores, the Bible pretty much accepts as a truism what Dolly Parton sang: You are known by the company you keep. This helps explain why God didn’t want his children the Israelites hanging around with the other children in the neighborhood of Canaan and why people called Jesus a drunkard and a glutton (Mt. 11:19): just look at the people he hung out with! I’m reminded of the story of the minister who was approached by a group of parents who were concerned about her son’s behavior. “Where did he learn such awful language?” they asked, “and where did he get such terrible manners?” “Well,” answered the minister, “all I know is that he plays with your kids.”

Today the church observes All Saints Sunday, a celebration of the company we keep. All Saints Day was officially observed on November 1, but the Church has come to expect very little of you and thinks that you are either much too busy or too self-involved to bother to come to worship in the middle of the week. All Saints Day, and by extension All Saints Sunday, is itself a solution to a problem. For a time, the church recognized martyrs in the faith by granting them a special day of remembrance, but before long, the calendar had become full to overflowing with

martyrs' days. The solution was to designate one day as a kind of catch-all, "a day on which to commemorate all the saints who cannot be accorded their own specific dates, and whose names have often been forgotten."¹ Because we as Protestants do not have officially canonized saints, our observance of All Saints Day "is less about the great historic figures of the church than about the people we ourselves have known and revered."²

That latter point is, I think, a very helpful thing. If we think of the saints as only the great figures of the faith—brave evangelists such as Peter and Paul, towering intellects such as Augustine and Aquinas, or compassionate humanitarians such as Doris Day and Mother Teresa—then we are likely to think that we cannot attain to sainthood. If reserved exclusively to those who perform miracles or are conspicuously pious, the status of sainthood becomes remote and undesirable. The stained-glass saints, as I call them, while colorful, are reduced to being just that: flat, two-dimensional figures whose images cannot point beyond themselves to the Lord for whom "they lived and fought and toiled and died, the Lord they loved and knew."³

The Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament, however, call us all to be saints. In Leviticus 19:2, God charges Moses to say to the people of Israel: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (NIV). Citing this very verse, the writer of 1 Peter says, "[A]s he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct" (1:15, NRSV). The saintliness or sanctity that the Bible envisions is not the stained-glass variety, but what John Wesley called "holiness of heart and life." Holiness, or Christian perfection, for Wesley amounted to nothing more, but nothing less, than loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Holiness involved having our lives transformed by the love of God, and loving God in return, a love we demonstrate by loving our neighbor.

¹ Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 147-148.

² *Ibid.*, 148.

³ From "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God," (UM Hymnal #711), lyrics by Lesbia Scott © 1929, 1940.

Living a life of holiness, viz. a life of love, is the primary responsibility and privilege of the saint. Such a life of holiness is especially important because it testifies to the truth of God in those difficult times when God seems more absent than present, more hidden than visible. The lives of the saints—ordinary, everyday believers like you and me—serve to announce to the world that God is still very much actively involved in the world he loves and created.

The story of Ruth is the story of one such ordinary, everyday person whose faith testified to the truth of God in some very difficult times. Because we know her story so well from repeated tellings at Vacation Bible School and countless readings at weddings, we tend to make Ruth one of the stained-glass saints, an uncomplicated heroine “who gently walks from Moab to Bethlehem behind Naomi, who charmingly bends behind the harvesters” in their gleaning.⁴ As Johanna Bos points out, “If we imagine Ruth in color, she comes in pastels. Her face unlined, her cloak unrumpled, she glides through the difficulties with which life faces her.”⁵ But Ruth is not a stained glass saint, nor is her faith uncomplicated.

Her story takes place “in the days when the judges ruled” (Ruth 1:1), a time “when violence against women, vengeance, idolatry, death, and disintegration were widespread.”⁶ Famine and its attendant horrors of theft, violence, starvation, and disease stalked the land of Judah. To escape these horrors, the family of Elimelech—his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion—left their home in Bethlehem and settled in the land of Moab. Such a move is ironic for several reasons. First, Bethlehem means literally, “house of bread.” There was no food in the house of bread, and so this family moved to Moab, which presents the second irony. Israelites traditionally regarded Moabites as their enemies, for when Israel was wandering

⁴ Johanna W.H. Bos, *Ruth, Esther, Jonah*, Knox Preaching Guides, ed. John H. Hayes (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986) 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ E. John Hamlin, *Surely There Is a Future: A Commentary on the Book of Ruth*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans and Edinburgh: The Handsel Press Ltd., 1996) 5.

hungry and thirsty in the wilderness, Deuteronomy 23:4 says the Moabites “did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt.” Now the Israelite family of Elimelech finds food in Moab, the sons marry local women, they settle down, and their future looks bright.

That sunshine of hope and happiness was not to last, however. After ten years, Elimelech and his two sons all died. Naomi “was left without her two sons or her husband” (1:5). All Naomi had in the world were her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, and memories of happier times. When she learned that “the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food” (1:6), Naomi resolved to return to her homeland. Initially Orpah and Ruth set out for Bethlehem with their mother-in-law, but she argued with them, pointing out that she could not provide a future with security for them by having sons and giving them husbands. “Turn back, my daughters,” she said, “why will you go with me?” (1:12).

With great reluctance and considerable grief, Orpah does indeed turn back, back to her people and her gods, back to her former way of life, back to the security of home. Ruth does not. In spite of Naomi’s repeated arguments and protestations, Ruth stays. Ruth begs Naomi to stop arguing, saying her mind is made up and she is committed to a future with Naomi: “Where you go, I will go;” she says, “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” (1:16-17).

Because we hear this in Sunday school and at weddings, we do not hear just how radical is Ruth’s commitment. As Professor Bos says,

In a world where male support is vital to one’s existence, a widow is at the bottom of the heap. Widows are, with orphans, in the Bible always on the lists of those who need special care and justice accorded to them. Ruth allies herself, as such a person without strength, to another such person. She says in so many words, ‘I’ll stay with you at the bottom of the heap.’⁷

⁷ Bos, *Ruth, Esther, Jonah*, 5.

Ruth is a saint because of the company she kept. She had committed herself to the family into which she married as well as to the God they worshiped. Since Yahweh is Ruth's God and Israel is her people, therefore she will share life with Naomi. Since Ruth was "neither legally required nor customarily expected to remain with her mother-in-law," her speech must be understood as an act of steadfast love and loyalty far beyond what is normal or expected.⁸ Whereas Naomi had tried to reason with Ruth about the disadvantages of remaining with her, it is clear that Ruth's "words and actions are governed by loyalty and love, rather than by logic."⁹

This act of loyalty and love, this pledge of compassion and companionship, is possible only because God is known by the company he keeps. Ruth could only know such covenant love because she had seen and heard and experienced the kind of covenant love with which the God of Israel loves. Ruth could only know such steadfast loyalty because she had seen and heard and experienced the kind of steadfast loyalty with which the God of Israel is faithful. Ruth could create a new and binding community with Naomi only because she had seen and heard and experienced the kind of new and binding community that the God of Israel creates. Ruth could go and lodge and die and be buried with Naomi only because she had committed herself in faith to God. Ruth could only be a saint, someone who loved God and her neighbor, because someone had witnessed to God's love by loving her.

⁸ Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, *The Book of Ruth: Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*, New Interpreters Bible II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 908.

⁹ Ibid.