

“Family Radically Redefined”

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

October 13, 2019, Pentecost 18 NL 2019/Yard Sale Celebration

Ruth 1: 1-17

Today we are celebrating. We are celebrating the way that God has been at work in us and through us—the way God has carried us through 40 years of our Yard Sale.

And for our reading today in the Narrative Lectionary, we have the beautiful story of Ruth. We just read the first chapter today but I encourage you to read the whole book this week—it’s only 4 chapters long.

It’s a love story—a very unusual one. The closing verses that we read today are sometimes read at weddings. “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” It’s a stunning expression of commitment and faithfulness. It’s all about love.

But this is not a sweet story. This is a story that would have shaken the Jewish people to their core. This is a story that would have shaken the Jewish people to their core because it challenges some of their basic assumptions about people. Ruth is actually the Good Samaritan story of the Old Testament.

When Jesus told the story of the Samaritan who showed compassion on the man who was wounded and lying by the side of the road, that shook people up because their assumption was that Samaritans are not good. They are not compassionate and they are definitely not the hero of the story.

In this story, Ruth is a Moabite. Moabites are every bit as bad as the Samaritans of Jesus’s day. They are despised by the Israelites. They are seen as dangerous and inhospitable. There is even a law, recorded in Deuteronomy that says Moabites should never be admitted into the Jewish worship.

So, a story where a Moabite woman is the example of over-the-top faithfulness and love is not a pleasant rom-com. It is *disturbing*. Disturbing of the basic assumptions that the Jewish people had about the people around them—about the way the world is—and their place in it.

I want to give just one more piece of context—this story was written—this word from God came at a particularly appropriate time. The book of Ruth came soon after the return from the Babylonian exile.

The Babylonians had taken about 50,000 of the rich and powerful Jewish people off to Babylon. They left the poorer people behind. These people who had been left behind intermarried with people of other ethnic backgrounds—including the Moabites. And during the 70 years that the wealthy folks were away, the ones who were left behind took over their lands.

When the exile ended and the formerly wealthy came back, there were people living on their lands. They had built houses and had families that were multi-ethnic—and now the owners were back. It was a mess!

Ezra was the priest—the religious leader—during this time and Nehemiah was the political leader. And if you read those books of the Bible, you can’t miss how xenophobic they are. The message is blunt: All Jewish men should divorce their foreign wives. They should abandon their families of mixed ethnicities. God’s promise is just for the Jewish people, so you need to separate the Jews from everyone else.

At the same time—in this extremely anti-foreigner time—the word of God comes through this subversive story of Ruth. In a time when the political leader instituted a policy of family separation, God gives a story of a new definition of family—a new picture of where ultimate loyalties lie.

The story starts with Naomi and her husband and sons fleeing to Moab because they are starving. In today's language, they are economic refugees, and they go to Moab because they are desperate—which is the only reason you would ever go there if you were a Jew. But clearly this family is open to having their prejudices and assumptions challenged because they get to know the Moabite people. The two sons marry Moabite women.

But tragedy strikes again and the both Naomi's husband and sons die. So, now there are 3 widows—Naomi and her 2 daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. There is clearly deep love between these 3 women—who share no common blood. Naomi begs her daughters-in-law to go back to their families. You're young, you can marry again. And with a lot of tears, Orpah does that.

But Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. The Moabite daughter-in-law says with her beautiful words, "I declare that we are family." And she puts those words into action—Ruth sticks with Naomi; she goes with her—to the place that is home for Naomi but a foreign land for Ruth.

In this story, the meaning of family is radically redefined. It is extended and expanded in the wildest of ways.

The critical element of family is not who you are related to by blood. What makes a family is something that in Hebrew is called *hesed*.

It's hard to translate *hesed* perfectly. It's mercy. Lovingkindness. Faithful love. Love that goes beyond anything that is deserved or expected. It's love—not as a feeling or attitude—but *love in action*. *Hesed* is the essential quality of God. It's who God is.

In the story of Ruth, God's word to us is that "love in action"—commitment beyond what is expected is to those who may not have done anything to deserve it—is what the people of God are to be about, too.

It's about a radical definition of family.

We talk about the CLC family. I know the amazing love that people here—who are not related by blood—have for each other. I've seen the love in action—especially for people who are grieving. It is remarkable and precious.

But, as I've thought about it, the Yard Sale has been the way we have really lived into this Ruth story—it's been the way we have lived into a new definition of family. And it's been the way that we have witnessed to God's compassion and love.

We come together—physically together—in a way that feels like the best parts of a family. We are working for a common purpose. We eat together. We spend time together. We have our matching family outfits with our red tee-shirts.

We also experience some of the rougher parts of being a family—We can be tired and cranky. Our patience and kindness is not always evident. And, when it comes time to clean-up, a lot of family members have found other places to be.

We are human and imperfect.

But we have done all of this—not to raise money for our congregation—but to support organizations and ministries that serve people we don’t even know. And many of them are foreigners.

This is where we are living into this story of Ruth and the radical definition of family it shows us. Like Ruth pledges herself to Naomi, we have committed ourselves to the people who are served Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services—an organization that has welcomed over 500,000 immigrants and refugees over the last 80 years.

We have committed ourselves to Housing Up and the hundreds of families who have gotten the stability of a secure place to live. And through the ministry of our own Food Pantry, we have committed ourselves to some of these same families by providing a couple of bags of food, cleaning and hygiene products.

Through Lutheran Social Services we have pledged ourselves to the youth of the Youth Haven Summer Camp—all from families who are touched by AIDS/HIV. And through Samaritan Ministry, we commit ourselves to people who are taking courageous next steps out of homelessness or joblessness.

The Yard Sale has been the vehicle—the means through which we have loved all these people we have never met. It has been the way we have come to understand just how big the CLC truly is.

And, we have also born witness to God’s *hesed*. God’s faithful love. God’s extensive love. Not everyone who has shopped at the Yard Sale over the years has clued into the fact that we did not keep the money raised—that we gave it all away. But some people got it. And I can’t help but believe it left an impression. Here was a church pouring a massive amount of time and energy into something that was not for our immediate church family—but for people in need—those who we were loving like family—like God’s family.

God is at work in our story just like God was at work in the story of Ruth. God has been at work—behind the scenes—through us—through 40 years of Yard Sale ministry. We give thanks today for the way God has used us to love this world and witness to how inclusive God’s family is.

The Yard Sale is ending but God’s work through us is not. We open ourselves to discovering the new ways God is seeking to use us.

It really is all about love.

And love never ends.

Thanks be to God. Amen.