

# “Where Do We Go From Here?”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – August 27, 2023*

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Ruth 1:1-22

The book of Judges, which comes right before Ruth in the Old Testament, ends in chaos and conflict; and concludes with these ominous words: “In those days, there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” (Judges 21:25)

Doing “what is right in their own eyes” is a direct denial of God’s Law, which is given to promote life in community. In the time of the judges, Israel fails to fulfill that Law and descends into times of turmoil.

If the book of Judges is about the people of Israel not keeping the Law, then Ruth is about people going above and beyond the requirements of the Law. Ruth, a foreigner, a Moabite, is not required to follow the laws of Israel. She had married an Israelite, but when he dies, she is expected to return to the home of her parents. This is what her sister-in-law, Orpah, does. That is what Naomi, her mother-in-law, urges her to do.

Instead, as we hear, Ruth vows to remain with her mother-in-law, to accompany her to this new, foreign land, and to become a part of her people and her faith. Hers becomes the story of *hesed* – faithfulness, kindness, and covenantal love – lived out through everyday, ordinary human beings; much like you and me. Time and again, Ruth – and others who surround the grief-stricken Naomi – go above and beyond what they are obligated to do; and in doing so, they incarnate the *hesed* – the love and loyalty – of God; a God who never speaks in the book of Ruth but who works behind the scenes to bless, to redeem, and to create new life and possibility where there was only emptiness and despair.<sup>1</sup>

In our world today, there is no shortage of people who “do what is right in their own eyes.” Even within the church, it is easy to cite examples of broken covenants and failures of faithfulness and loving-kindness. Too many people have been harmed, excluded, or ignored; misjudged, not listened to, or left to mire in their pain.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn M. Schifferdecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Over the course of this sermon series, we have been asking questions to help learn more about one another and how we can show kindness, mercy, and love: *Where are you from? Where does it hurt?*” and *“What do you need?* We have been challenged to listen closely to each other’s stories and respond with *hesed* – mercy, faithfulness, and loving-kindness.

In many ways, the church has – and might still – do this well. Congregations that engage in deep conversation and listen well to one another find ways to help, support, and love people in and beyond the walls of the church. Here, at Valley, programs and ministries such as the Men’s Prayer Breakfast, the Pass-It-On resale store, the Faith Garden – just to name a few – began by discerning a need in the community and then, having participants and volunteers go far above and beyond what would ever be expected – with amazing loyalty, faithfulness, and loving-kindness – in an effort to meet those needs.

But, as the last few years have revealed, the church in the United States is undergoing a time of disruption and change. Congregations of all different sizes and traditions are adjusting to an increasingly disconnected and digital world. Many families that once worshipped together now live scattered around the nation or globe. Loneliness has become rampant. Sunday mornings or weekday evenings that used to be reserved for church are now filled with a long list of other activities and obligations. People are worn out. Hatred and division has manifested in violence. We are wounded people. And as with most institutions, trust in the church has plummeted in the wake of scandals, conflicts, and intolerance. Hope has been shaken.

In response to these changes – and more – congregations and their members have sought to adapt and transform. Many churches now offer streaming options for worship, are increasing their digital presence, are choosing what multi-media equipment is appropriate for their worship space. Congregations and denominations are struggling to decide how welcoming and accepting they want to and can be. Churches are trying to determine how to best partner with community organizations working for justice, peace, and reconciliation; especially at a time when resources and volunteers can seem scarce.

What does a story like Ruth have to tell us about times like these; and how might it help us to address the daunting question, “Where do we go from here?” What we can learn from the relationship between Ruth and Naomi – both widowed, but from different places, no longer with any obligation under the Law to stay together – is the value of *hesed* – of faithfulness and loving-kindness, even in the midst of uncertainty and loss. No matter their differences, and despite their

mutual pain and loss, Ruth and Naomi choose to cling to one another, to go far beyond what is expected in accepting, loving, and supporting each other. They choose *hesed*.

You may have heard me speak of the time my church in Kentucky chose to sponsor four Dinka refugees from Sudan; so-called “Lost Boys” who were orphaned as children during their country’s civil war and walked hundreds of miles together to a refugee camp in Kenya. These four, with the adopted English names Abraham, David, James (j-a-m-e-s), and Ja-mes (also j-a-m-e-s), came to us through a refugee resettlement program when they were in their late teens. They arrived in the United States with nothing more than the clothes they were wearing, so the congregation helped furnish their apartment, clothe them, drive them to appointments, and – over time – help them enroll in school, find jobs, and learn how to drive.

At the time, my son, AJ, was a toddler; the Sudanese boys loved AJ and the feeling was mutual. We used to joke that when AJ was babbling, he must have been speaking Dinka. The lost boys used to carry AJ around on their shoulders – actually, on one shoulder – just like they had done and had been done for them when they were wandering through the deserts in search of a place to stay. It made members in the church nervous that they were going to drop AJ on his head, but this was how they loved him, and so I trusted them.

“Where do we go from here?” There are many choices that congregations will be making as they adapt in this often scary, rapidly changing world. But decisions we will make need to be rooted in *hesed* – in faithfulness and loving-kindness – confident that God is working behind the scenes to bless, redeem, and bring about new possibilities – ones beyond our ability to imagine – even amid the confusion and loss of painful change.

Rev. Aisha Brooks-Johnson is the Executive Presbyter in Greater Atlanta, charged with assisting over eighty congregations navigating change and disruption in these chaotic times. She knows well that in order for the church to thrive, it needs to adapt – not only in technology, but in the ways that it listens to, welcomes, and accepts one another as members of the human family. Let’s hear a little of what she has to say about where we go from here:

*People need to know that God loves the condition of each human body, as well as the state of each soul. We know that the scriptures call on justice to flow down like rivers, and that all who follow God are to do justice, and love kindness, and walk humbly with God.*

*What does deep justice look like in a diverse, multicultural, and intercultural world? Your definition of justice may not be the same as your neighbor. You can only speak a love language of deep justice if you engage with your neighbors in a way that is authentic and empathetic. Love languages of deep justice may require time, investment, sacrifice, and a de-centering of your priorities and your way of being in the world. New love languages of justice will demand that you learn to listen. And I mean, really listen to the cries of others. It will demand that you take the time to see the hurt, to feel the intensity of the pain, to listen to the outcries, to see the inequity, the systemic trauma, the pleas, the unsettledness, and the yearning for deep healing in our broken world.*

*We have got to go from this place with more love, bold love, radical love, tangible love, deep love. We must go from this place with languages of love that articulate the hope, innovation, truth, justice, and mercy – even if it means we have to change again and again.*

One of the songs that the lost boys from Sudan learned from Christian mission workers in the refugee camp that they brought to our church in Kentucky is *Siyahamba*, which translates to mean “We Are Marching” or “We are Walking.” They understood that as they were walking, for those many months and over those hundreds of treacherous miles, they had been walking in the light of God; the God who showed them *hesed* – faithfulness and loving-kindness – finally brought them into our midst, and into this mutually life-changing relationship. I hope you will enjoy hearing and singing *Siyahamba* as we close today’s service and prepare to go forth into the world, ever-walking in God’s *hesed* and light.

“Where do we go from here?” That is no easy question to answer. But, as the church, we march forward into this largely unknown future knowing that we are not alone; God has bound us together, giving us the strength to go above and beyond what even the Law expects of us, to listen and love and trust one another to heal, change, and grow. Thanks be to God. Amen.