

“Your People”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Revelation 21:1-6a & Ruth 1:1-18
November 7, 2021 - All Saints' Sunday

Our third reading comes from the first chapter of the book of Ruth, that wonderful and subversive story of two women, pushed to the margins for different reasons, who persist and find a way. This morning we're just getting the setup for the tale that follows, but it contains the best-known line of the entire book, as Ruth offers to Naomi a promise that endures and has particular resonance on All Saints' Sunday.

Listen to the first movement of this ancient drama:

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.”

Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.”

Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So Naomi said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”

But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; 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!”
When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In this space on Tuesday night, college students from UKirk Birmingham gathered for worship around the table. We read scripture, had communion, and prayed for one another. But we spent most of the time together telling stories of the saints - aunts and grandmothers, friends and church members, the people who have gone before us.

It took a little while for the conversation to get started. One of the older and wiser members of the group pointed out that much of our culture tries to deny death. We're always trying to stave it off, to ignore our mortality, and to not talk about grief. That was true before the more than 750,000 deaths from Covid that we have yet to have a chance to grieve as a nation.

Once the stories started, we really got into it. There was a lot of laughter, a few moments of meaningful silence, and a couple of instances of throat-clearing and misty eyes. Our bodies are eager to tell those stories, to remember those we love in our bones and eyes and belly laughs.

Long before I got here, the Rev. Sid Burgess began a tradition of including in the All Saints' sermon remembrances for the members of this congregation who had died since the previous first Sunday in November.

My first All Saints' Sunday, I had the honor of carrying on this sacred custom, remembering Melba Burgess and Helen Burney and Inez Jesse. The next year, it was Mike Laughlin and Jane Grimsley. Then, Clarice Goodwin, Lois North, and Kenny Smith. 2017 took Dot Murrah, Dian Bailey, Barbara Murphy, Marilyn Merkle, Lil Warren, and Millie Albright. We were spared any deaths at all the following year. In 2019 we remembered - Jim Halsey, Nell Barron, and Mike Morgan. Last November, on Zoom, we remembered the B's - Bill, Barbara, and Bob - that's "Bill" Wilkes, Barbara Steward, and Bob Burney.

For some of you, that flurry of names instantly hooked you into a memory, or a lifetime of memories. And for others they were the names of people you never met, but you know that their stories were intertwined with this congregation - with this family - and therefore, their stories are connected to yours, even if you're brand new to us.

Before the students arrived Tuesday night, I was talking to the UKirk student intern and she mentioned that growing up in her church in Georgia she had attended dozens of funerals before she got to Birmingham and was surprised to meet people in college who'd never known anybody who had died. I told her about my best friend from the age of 12 who just in the past few months called in a bit of a panic looking for help. His coworker had had a stroke and my friend didn't know how to go visit him in the hospital or how to talk to the man's wife and kids. My friend is a pretty social guy, but aside from his family I don't think he knows anyone more than fifteen years older than him.

One of the things that being part of a faith community does for us is connecting our lives to people we might not otherwise know. We meet folks of all ages, with all sorts of backgrounds. And we walk with them and they walk with us. Their stories become our stories. Their struggles become our struggles. Where they go, we will go. Where they dwell, we will dwell.

They become our people.

Of course, that doesn't only happen at church. Y'all find your people — here and elsewhere. But whoever your people are — some mix of blood and history and common interest and work and the people who just know too much about you to ever walk away from — you choose them. And I have to believe that your choice of people is connected, even in a buried, obscured way, to your faith and your identity and who God has called you to be.

It was a choice for Ruth. Naomi pointed out every reason Ruth should just go start a new life and disconnect herself from her mother-in-law. It would have been a wise fiscal and social decision to go home instead of clinging to this widow who felt left in the lurch by her God.

Ruth couldn't do it. She chose the harder path of going with, walking alongside, intertwining her story and her fate, struggling with. She made Naomi her people. Together, they conspired to find their way back into community.

And I bet it hurt at times. I wonder what they talked about when Naomi was near the end of her life. Their connection was forged in grief, each losing her husband. And then they had their adventure together. When Naomi died, Ruth told stories about her, I bet. With tears and with laughter, she remembered her people.

Paul Hopkins was technically not a member of EPC, but he was married to Mary for 48 years and whenever I went to visit her, Paul would sit with us and give me a hard time. "You know, Joe, he's a Republican," Mary would snort. Paul would reply, "Yeah, and she's a Democrat!" And they'd both roll their eyes. Paul was an electrical engineer who served in the U.S. Army Air Corps and then spent his career at Alabama Power. In retirement he volunteered for umpteen organizations, built clocks, and doted on his family. He sang in the choir at Shades Valley Presbyterian for decades.

Paul died at the age of 99 and 3/4 on Christmas Day. It was a Friday.

Mary Hopkins marched down to Edgewood, walked in these doors, and immediately found her people. She worked for the Army Air Corps Officers Club during the Second World War, then worked as a bookkeeper. In retirement she joined Paul in all that volunteer work, but what I'll remember are those visits in her living room. She'd tell stories from seventy years ago with stunning clarity. Then she'd ask for y'all. Mary wasn't able to worship with us for the last few years of her life - she struggled to both see and hear. But that wouldn't stop her. She kept track of what grade all the EPC kids were in. She wanted to know how the Christmas bake sale had gone. She wanted stories of you, her people; the people with whom she shared a walk, a place, and a God.

Mary died at the age of 96 on March 23rd. It was a Tuesday, and it would have been Paul's 100th birthday.

So many others died this year, and since we celebrated this holy day last in the sanctuary. We'll take time to name some of them — and so many others we want to remember from our lives — in just a few minutes. They are your people and, even if they are blood family, you chose them.

Tell a story about them to someone who needs to hear it.

Persist in their memories in service of the God whose home is among mortals, who dwells with us in our tears and calls us to rejoice, who we know in Christ, whose story is life and death, and life.

To God, the maker of all things
and giver of our days,

To God be all glory, honor, thanksgiving, and praise. Amen.