

May 3, 2015
Ruth 1:15-18
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Our People

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

Today's reading comes from the book of Ruth, one of only two books in the Bible that bears the name of a woman. It is a compelling short story that focuses on a particular family. The story includes famine, immigration, interreligious marriage, grief, and hope.

The story begins with the woman Naomi and her husband Elimelech and their two sons. This family leaves their homeland, Bethlehem, at the time of a famine. They go to Moab where there is food. While there the sons marry Moabite women. In time all three men die, leaving the three women alone. Naomi hears that the famine is over in her homeland and prepares to go home. She encourages her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab with their own people. One of them decides to stay but Ruth insists on going to Bethlehem with Naomi.

Today's reading is Ruth's famous pledge to entwine her life with her mother-in-law's.

SERMON

In his newest book, *The Road to Character*, columnist David Brooks speaks of the distinction between resume virtues and eulogy virtues. Resume virtues are the things we put on our resume – our achievements. Eulogy virtues are the things people say about us when we die – our character, as Brooks calls it. Brooks invites us to imagine what people will say about us in our eulogies and how does it compare to what we write on our resumes. It makes sense to me that Brooks himself who is now in midlife with a strong resume would find himself exploring eulogy virtues, wondering about character.

In yesterday's memorial service for Fred Barstow I observed this distinction between resume and eulogy virtues. There were comments about things you would learn from resume – including that he was a very accomplished skier and that he had patents related to his work in photography at the Polaroid Company. However, the eulogy comments focused more on his character of being a gentle and kind person, which he was.

In the book, Brooks explores how a selection of famous people's mistakes and adversities strengthened their characters.

Ruth and Naomi each experienced plenty of adversity. They knew hunger. They each knew the challenges of immigrating to an unfamiliar land. They lived in a cross cultural and cross religious extended family. Their husbands died and they were on their own.

In other words, by resume standards

- They were poor.
- They were women.
- They were widows.
- things didn't look good.

In reality the primary reason we know of these women is because of their resume connection to King David, the most famous king in Jewish history. If you know the rest of the story you know that Ruth becomes the great grandmother of King David.

However, even without that connection, by eulogy standards these woman shine.

- They are loyal to one another.
- They are clever in the midst of their cultural limitations.
- They are courageous, risking a great deal in hopes of a better future.

They have hope – even if they have to take turns holding on to that hope for each other.

These women are not related by blood. Yet they have a remarkable covenant with one another. I've often wondered why Ruth went with Naomi. Maybe it wasn't safe for her to return to her biological family. Maybe she wouldn't have been welcome. Whatever the reason, these two women, who were bound by their connection to the man who was Ruth's husband and Naomi's son, decide to continue to be family to one another.

Naomi and Ruth experience many adversities during their lifetimes. In the process their characters deepen. I suspect one of the things that helps is that they don't try to go it alone. It is no longer your people or my people, but our people.

Adversity is not something we relish. I haven't had anyone over the years tell me that they are hoping for more adversity. Yet if we have lived any length of time we do know the wisdom expressed in the letter to the Romans: *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.* (Romans 5:3-5)

There is, of course, the recognition that sometimes the adversity and suffering is so intense that people are crushed by it. Let us not romanticize adversity.

Yet it is obviously true that we do not always get what we want. It is probably better to learn that when we are young enough to have the support of loved ones to help us develop good character in the face of our thwarted desires.

There is so much emphasis on resume goals these days. It is creating enormous pressure on our young people. This is the season for high

school seniors when they have heard back from colleges. Some are delighted by the news they receive. Others are deeply disappointed and it may be the greatest adversity they have experienced in their lives to not get into the school of their dreams. It hurts.

Yet, it is an opportunity to focus on character virtues, instead of resume virtues. It is an opportunity for reflection on what are the most important things in life. It is an opportunity for families to make clear that we love our young people not for their resume accomplishments but simply because we love them.

I had a conversation about this resume pressure with some Bowdoin College students when I led a chapel service there a few weeks ago. We talked about this story in Ruth and the challenges of discerning what you are called to and how to use your gifts. The students were honest about the pressure they feel from parents, from professors, from other students, from the culture as a whole to succeed – in other words to have a great resume. We talked about what it means to deepen as a person – to develop character that lives in hope – even in the face of unfulfilled desires. It was a conversation that gives me hope.

Ruth and Naomi didn't amount to much by the resume standards of their times, but their eulogy virtues are still shared with us today. Their characters give us hope in steadfastness, in cleverness, and in courage.

May we live well in courage and hope.