

“Never Going to Give You Up”

The Little Book of Ruth

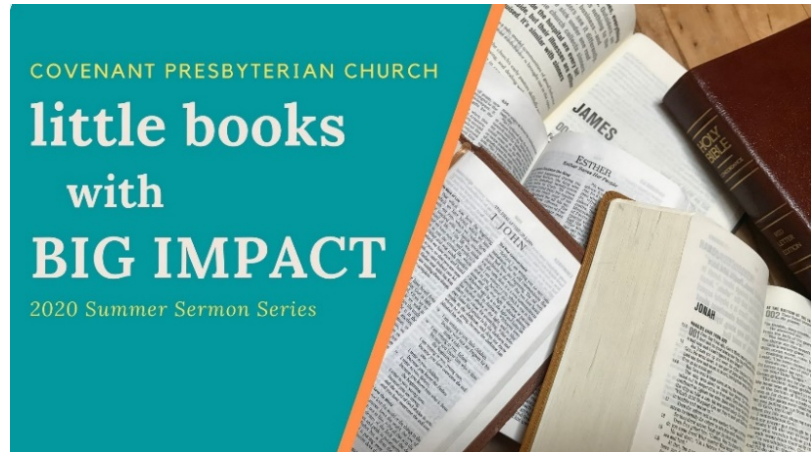
Ruth 1:16-17

Sunday, August 30, 2020

Rev. Jeff Fox-Kline

Covenant Presbyterian Church

Madison, WI



We’ve made it to the last of our little books with big impact. Throughout the course of the summer we’ve explored books from the old and new testament that have had an outsized impact despite their brevity. They say that brevity is the soul of wit, and these books have also shown us they can be the soul of wisdom. Prophets and letters have been well represented, but I have to admit that my favorite little books are the stories. Like reading a short story with a good hook, these books have been a joy to read, and today’s book is no exception. The book of Ruth is a short book lodged between two long books. It comes after Judges and right before Samuel. Much like the book of Jonah, this four-chapter book tells a complete story from beginning to end.

Here’s the (very) short version of the story. Naomi takes her husband and two sons to Moab from Israel. Moab was a country hated by Israel. Her sons marry two Moabites and then Naomi’s husband and sons die. Naomi goes back to Israel and Ruth insists on going with her, so she doesn’t have to suffer alone in her old age. Homeless and hopeless, Ruth goes to glean some food to survive. A relative of Naomi’s, named Boaz, notices Ruth gleaning and recognizes the ways in which Ruth was overwhelmingly good to Naomi. Ruth informs Boaz that because he is related to Naomi, he is what is known as ‘redeemer kinsman’ and can marry her to redeem Naomi’s family. Boaz wants to do this, but there’s actually a closer family member that has first dibs on marrying Ruth. Remember, this was a different time, and sometimes taking a ‘biblical view’ of marriage can mean some weird things. Boaz tricks this closer relative into turning down the marriage and Ruth and Boaz get married! They have a kid named Obed, who is the grandfather of King David. The End!

That's just the very barebones version of the story, and the whole story is worth reading. It's short, but wonderful, and makes for an engaging read.

What stands out in this book is the tremendous lengths that people, especially Ruth, go to in order to show love to others. There's no better example of Ruth's tremendous love and devotion than chapter 1, verses 16-17

“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.

¹⁷ 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!”

Note that Ruth is saying this to her mother-in-law, to whom she has no obligation, and in fact who is telling her that she should leave and go back to her family. Ruth's devotion is a level of loving kindness that exceeds anything that would ever be expected of her. Naomi is now an elderly widow, with no sons and no hope of any future sons. Ruth volunteered, as both a widow and a despised foreigner, to go support her mother-in-law because she saw the vulnerability and danger that Naomi was heading back to. Ruth willingly gave radically of herself because to care for the vulnerable. And this loving kindness ripples outward, with Boaz seeing the kindness that Ruth showed, and demonstrating similar radical kindness to Ruth, having heard of her kindness.

Ruth showed a level of sacrificial love for the oppressed that we can only hope to attain. Ruth's example is extreme – she literally gave up everything to support Naomi – but is a good place for us to examine how we can support our neighbors. Because our neighbors need our help. Jacob Blake is our neighbor and needs our help. George Floyd needed our help. Breonna Taylor needed our help. Freddie Gray needed our help. Because we need to give what we can and support those whom we love who are in danger.

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Our siblings are in pain. People made in the image of God whom we are called to love and care for as we would care for ourselves. We need to let Ruth’s words to Naomi be our north star as we pursue justice. “Where you go, I will go. Your people shall be my people. Where you die, I will die.” The first step to all of this is to mirror Ruth in showing our devotion. To genuinely tie our own hearts to the hearts of our siblings who are suffering and dying. This requires a shift in orientation that transforms ‘them’ into ‘us’. It is a shift in orientation that is not content with sympathy, but empathy and compassion. It means that we need to feel pain, not just feel bad for others.

And this devotion should result in a tangible change in our selves. Not necessarily a comfortable change. Even one that will cause us some pain and discomfort. But it should result in changing the way we act to make the world a better place. After we declare ourselves fully loyal to the oppressed among us our behavior and actions should change. We start to make phone calls to our elected leaders telling them that inaction on racial injustice is unacceptable. We start to more publicly and vocally affirm that Black lives matter. We intervene when we hear racist thoughts and ideas. We start to attend protests. We give our money to organizations that support causes that advance anti-racist ideas and policies. Organizations like MOSES, Just Dane, The Boys and Girls Club, Nehemiah, among many other organizations that do important work in Madison. We spend our time focused on doing things that make the world better and safer.

In the story of Ruth very little attention is paid to God’s activity. The story is about people doing good to one another and the world becoming a better place as a result. Through that we see beautiful evidence of God’s activity, drawing folks together to do good. God’s activity is seen through the human activity of devoting ourselves to each other. How can our neighbors see God’s activity through our works? Where our

siblings die, may we also die. May we die to apathy and disinterest, and rise to a life of passion, compassion and peace.