

## “Not Even Death”

Love has another plan. When we read from the bible we open ourselves to hear what God is saying to us. Today that message is “love has another plan.” Just when we’re certain nothing else can be done, love has another plan. When we’ve exhausted all our options and tried every road with nowhere else to turn, love has another plan. When the weight of sadness or loss or frustration seems more than we can bear, love has another plan. Life can be described in many ways and one way is to think of life as a series of events; things that happen to us, things that happen around us, and the impact all of that makes on us. What we feel, what we think, what we do and what we choose not to do is a response to these events; this becomes the flow that is our lives. Now, sometimes we make up our minds that things are what they are. It’s not that we give up, it’s just that we are realistic. Whatever has happened to us or whatever is happening around us, it is what it is, as we say. If it hurts, it hurts. If it’s gone, it’s gone. If it’s the end, then it’s over. When we’re in that kind of frame of mind, when we’re certain that whatever has happened is what must be, God has a direct message for us. It’s a message wrapped in God’s power to create something out of nothing and it’s a message that echoes through all of scripture. Love has another plan.

The power of this life-changing love is at the center of the story of Naomi and Ruth. We’re reading from the book today and it’s one of those places in the bible where hearing more than just a few verses is important. If time were no issue we’d read the entire four chapters of the Book of Ruth it’s presented as a short story that’s meant to be heard. Katya shared some of that wider story with us and let’s recap. It’s called the Book of Ruth but it’s not just about Ruth. The story is about the relationship between Naomi and Ruth. Remember, this is about love. The context is set as we learn that Naomi, along with her husband and sons, lived in the town of Bethlehem. Now, Bethlehem means “House of Bread,” which is ironic given the fact that there was a famine in the land. In other words, here was no bread in the house. This forces Naomi and her family to flee to the foreign country of Moab. Not unlike refugees in our world, Naomi’s family was on the move in search of a more secure future. When the family settled in Moab tragedy befell them. Naomi’s husband died. This is where we are reminded of the cultural realities in that day regarding men and women. A woman found her value and worth connected to her man. Without him she was vulnerable and had nothing. For the husbandless Naomi her lifeline became her sons, the men in her life. At least she had them. The story tells that each son married a Moabite girl and the family was, once again, building for the future but then tragedy fell on them once more. Both sons died, leaving Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, alone. If life is the flow of events that happen to us and our response to them, we see how Naomi’s life becomes defined by grief and unimaginable loss. Death takes everything from her and Naomi does what any of us would do, she decides to go home to Bethlehem. She’s heard that bread is being made again and maybe in Bethlehem she can find comfort in what is familiar and known. The three women see themselves as family and so, initially, they stay together on the journey to Bethlehem. But then, Naomi realizes it would be far better for the younger women to stay in their own land and with their own people. Her bad luck and her deep grief has pulled them down further than they deserve. And so, Naomi insists that Orpah and Ruth stay in Moab. She intends to travel on alone. Orpah takes Naomi’s advice. She stays back but when it comes to Ruth love had another plan.

The beautiful words Ruth speaks to Naomi reflect love’s power to create a new future. To her grieving mother-in-law she says, “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” (Ruth 1:16) Ruth understood the reality of what had happened. She wasn’t minimizing the depth of their loss but Ruth knew their future was not limited by their grief. Love creates a new way. Ruth reminds Naomi that they still have love and not even death can take that away. This points directly to the power of God’s love for us in Christ. On this special morning of All Saints’ Sunday we face the reality of death. We are not pretending it away but we also know that the destiny of our lives is not shaped by our loss. Those we name aloud and the many others we remember in our hearts have been taken from us in a physical way. These losses impact us in deep ways but loss and sadness are not the only realities that shape our future. Love has another way and death can’t take that from us. Our worship today remembers those who have died but they are not lost to us. They are found in God. They are raised up to a new life. They are participating with us in our communion and it’s made possible because of God’s love for us through Jesus Christ.

I often remember the feeling I had at the time my grandmother died. As is customary for many families, we gathered in the funeral home parlor before the public visitation was set to begin. The casket was there. My grandmother’s body was there but I had the strong feeling that she, the essence of her, was not there. She wasn’t in that body. She wasn’t in that casket. Where was she? She was with me. It hard to find the words but we can’t deny the reality. Oh, death is real and the loss it brings can’t be denied but there is no doubt that love has another plan.

Today, through God's eternal love for us in Christ we are connected to Jesus and to all those who are raised up in him. This is a day of great hope. This is a day when we are especially aware that the limitations of time and space have no ultimate hold on us. I don't know what plans you have for today or what may be working on you or weighing on you this morning. Those realities are things we must deal with and respond to, but know this. God's love is at work in your life, too. God's love is connecting us to Christ and connecting us to each other and connecting us to our loved ones who have died and yet are raised to eternal life. No matter our histories, this is what God makes possible now, and that means our futures will be shaped by love's plan for our lives. Nothing, not even death, can take that away.

Amen.