

“I’ve Been Meaning to Ask... Where Do We Go From Here?”

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Acts 10:1-35

Ruth 1:1-19a

I wonder, what would have happened if Ruth had **not** followed Naomi to Bethlehem?

I wonder, what would have happened if Cornelius— who had all the power and prestige of a centurion of the Italian Cohort- had never listened to the angel that had told him to send for Peter, a Jew, and a follower of Christ? Or, what would have happened if Peter had dismissed his vision of wild animals on the roof as simply a silly dream, rather than recognize it as the voice of God telling him he needed to expand his mind to see people different from him as clean, and not only that but also as good contributors to the faith and family of Jesus Christ?

There was a movie in the 1990’s, a romantic comedy with Gwynneth Paltrow, called “Sliding Doors.” I enjoyed it then, and so I started to show it to my child... until I remembered that the humor may be more geared toward adult mindsets than to 10-year olds. Still, the premise is interesting for any age. In the film, a woman is rushing down the stairs of the London Tube to reach the platform for the subway train she’s trying to reach. She dashes to the doorways, but it closes one second before she is able to get through. Then, the film rewinds. And again, it shows her dashing down the stairway, but with the smallest change in circumstances, when a child that was playing with a doll on the stairway banister gets moved out of the way by her parent. That makes all the difference; in the replay, the main character makes it to the subway doors just in time to wedge her hand into the closing doors, and to push them open. She makes her train.

The film goes on to show how much of a difference her life would have made, depending on whether or not she made that train: would she have caught her boyfriend cheating? Would she have found the love of her life? Would she live? Would she die?

If we were to get a little sliding doors on our biblical texts for today, I wonder what would have happened if *the relationships* in each of our stories had not taken off. For example: when Naomi’s husband died, and her sons died, Naomi was consumed by bitterness. Because she was still a kind person, she did not want to infect her daughters-in-law with her bitterness. She told them, “No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” And she urged them to each return to the home of their mothers, and find husbands for themselves while they are still young.

That’s exactly what Orpah did. She went back home. But Ruth made a different choice. She summed up Naomi in all her bitterness and pain, and decided that casting her lot with another woman in mourning to figure out a future together seemed far better than being on her own to

muddle through. And so she followed Naomi, to Bethlehem, and they shared a life and a love together. And Ruth also married a kinsman to Naomi, and bore a child, one who would make Ruth a foremother in the genealogy to Jesus. Not only that, her story stood out as one that shifted a paradigm, of welcoming a stranger and lifting her up to becoming a matriarch of the faith.

But what would have happened if Ruth went back to her home in Moab, like Orpah did? What if Naomi continued, all alone in her bitterness? Would she have been a forgotten woman? Would the Hebrew Bible have this rich lesson in appreciation for the gifts of outside cultures to the faith? Would Jesus have even been born, without this woman Ruth who was an ancestor to Joseph, Jesus' earthly father?

If you think about the story from Acts, this vision Peter had on the roof was not a physical journey, like Ruth took with Naomi, but it was a spiritual journey and a paradigm shift. Cornelius, who belonged to an elite group of people, took time to listen to what a lowly and persecuted Jew had to tell him. Peter— who had spent his life entrenched in teachings about the circle of identity that surrounded the descendents of Abraham— was moved to see how the Spirit was at work shaping the faith through people *outside* that faith tradition. It is possible that if either Peter or Cornelius had not listened to the other, the Christian faith would have kept contained to a very small group of people, and it would have fizzled out.

But those things did not happen, not in either story, and there is a reason why. I don't think it has to do with whether the people in the story chose to wear a leather tunic or a wool tunic that day, or whether they walked or rode a donkey (since there were no subways). The thing that made the difference is **relationship**. In each of these stories, a friendship is begun or strengthened. And that friendship changes the course of just about everything. For Peter and Cornelius, their friendship breaks open an openness to the story of who Jesus is and who Jesus calls— and it changes the course of the Christian faith. For Ruth and Naomi, a friendship brings the two on a journey from loss, mourning, and bitterness, to fullness and life. Not only that, it educated the people of Abraham to see that a Moabite— someone from beyond the chosen circle— can be a model for the steadfast love of God. That person went on to usher in the generations that would bring us Jesus the Christ.

One value I have found in friendship is that it inspires a collective reflection that allows you to move from a primitive, knee-jerk, survival-is-key reaction to life, to an intentional, grounded, and spiritual agency in life. In a sense, going through something with a friend allows you to channel God's partnership through relationship.

If you think about it, the past 2.5 years has left us more isolated from the kinds of relationships that matter. For the first phase of COVID, our isolation was necessary because it literally saved lives. The earlier strains of COVID were dangerous and deadly. People weren't vaccinated. And so we stayed home, for the most part, and we wiped our mail with Lysol if we could find it, just in case.

And while we stayed home, terrible things happened. George Floyd was killed. January 6 riots upended democracy. Russia waged war on Ukraine. Will Smith slapped Chris Rock. And we watched it all from our sofas.

But then things also opened up. We realized masks could keep us and others safe in public. Newer strains of COVID weren't as dangerous. People got vaccinated. The world creaked back into motion. But it was ****different****. It is still different.

Many of us found that staying home with our Netflix, and maybe a pandemic pup, feels easier than re-entering an uncertain world, even though we now have the tools to re-enter safely. I imagine that a great extent of the division and the vitriol we feel in today's society is some unchecked frustration that we cannot rewind history and erase the pandemic, and we no longer know how to ****be**** with one another. No amount of film magic can allow us to rewind and erase the past 3 years. We can't bring back the people who died; we can't resurrect the democracy we once commonly held in trust. We can't return and contain COVID-19 to the animals that first transmitted it to humans.

So, I have been meaning to ask, where do we go from here?

What our scriptures offer us today is a road map to well-being and wholeness in the face of a changing and uncertain world. And that road map is not a path, but a person, or people.

My dear friends Erik and Kerry have been in town visiting since Thursday. They are the friends I have wanted near me when I have gone through some of the most chaotic and painful times, and in fact one or both of them have been there for most of those in my adult life, and I have been with them through that too. And we have shared many joyful times together as well. Except, they live in Chicago, and the last time we had seen each other in person was the month before the pandemic shut everything down. Being with them for the past 3 days reminded me of how thirsty I am for the kind of friendship they bring. Seeing them in the flesh made me aware of how much a difference the grace of embodied presence makes in a friendship— the warmth of their skin, the smell of their clothes, the ways their bodies can hold the emotion of a heavy pause in conversation. These things just can't be experienced over Facetime or texting. My dog couldn't get enough of licking the scruff of Erik's bearded face— this is a new experience for him in a house full of females— and while I did not do that, I empathize with the need for closeness.

Here is what being close to these friends has brought out in me: the ability to laugh at myself. The chance to see myself as others who love me see me. The chance to learn from perspectives and identities and struggles that are not my own. A reminder of where I come from— that is the question we began this sermon series with. The chance to ask, "what matters to you right now, and what are you doing to find it?" "How are you cultivating joy in your life?"

And, as I have done with Erik and Kerry at many important stops on my journey, I have been able to ask the question with them, as we have done at so many other key points in our years of friendship, *Where do we go from here?*

We have asked this question of one another at key points, such as when we have had parents die, or when we were deciding whether to jump to the commitment of marriage with the people we loved, or whether to push forward in the ordination process even in the years when our denominations were not yet ordaining openly gay and lesbian candidates for ministry.

Some of those formative experiences are over and past. We have figured out much of what works and doesn't work with careers, home life, family. Some things we are still figuring out. I used to think that there would come an age when I would have it all figured out, and then I could just coast. But I have learned that is not true. I have learned I will always need friends in my life who can share the journey with me, in my being and in my becoming who God calls me to be.

My friends have also taught me that sometimes we do not *always* need to move forward to our next destination. There are times when the better choice is to rest where you are for a spell, and rather than changing your environment, staying put and examining who *you* have become in a landscape that has changed on its own, without you even leaving it.

But that is a different choice than the choice to not be on a journey, or the choice to not share the journey with anyone else. We know that not venturing out gives us what we expect. We don't risk exposure— not only to potential germs, but potential disappointments, or potential vulnerabilities in a relationship. And when we do not expose who we are to someone else, we do not risk disappointing them either.

But then we also miss out on the chance to have those vulnerabilities received in grace, held as they stretch us to build new life through our companionship.

I fear we have a growing epidemic of loneliness on our hands, because we have chosen not to leave the home, to call a friend, to be a friend to someone else, or to try a new experience. We have not risked exposing who we are, or being changed by someone else's story.

I have been meaning to ask, what are you doing to be a friend to someone else? Where are you allowing friendship to break through to your life, and to be changed by it? I am convinced that those are places where you also might find God.