

“Today I Choose Love”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
November 3, 2024

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Ruth 1:1-18, Mark 12:28-34

Who did you bring with you to church today?

Some of us brought a spouse, a friend, an aunt, or the sleepy teenager who was a little easier to rouse from bed thanks to the time change— although I would not be surprised if in some families, it is the kid encouraging the parents to get them to church. Others came on their own. But even if you walked or rode here by yourself, even if nobody sits on the pew cushion beside you, I am convinced that you are not alone in these pews. This church today is actually much more crowded than your eyes might tell you.

Each one of us carries with us the presence of those who brought us here, whether they are here physically with us or not. You may have a loved one who taught you about the faith. Even though they are gone, this faith they passed on to you— though stretched, challenged, and changed, lives on. Or maybe you bring with you the presence of someone whom you wish *would* come to church, someone who needs a little good news in their lives, someone who could use some assurance of God’s love for them, or is hungry for the sustenance that Christ’s table gives. If you are carrying someone like that in your heart today, I hope this worship service gives you enough to sustain you, and then makes your cup run over so that you can offer this good news, this love of God, to someone who needs it, even if that is beyond the walls of this sanctuary.

Today I bring with me my grandfather, who loved his church and loved having me worship with him. He used to pass out cough drops to those in the pews around him, but then listened to his grandchildren when they said no one wants a cough drop unless they have a cough- so he started handing out peppermints. He called the candy takers his “customers.” I’m pretty sure he and I would disagree on most things politically if we could have a conversation today, but regardless, he loved me and shared his love of church with me, and that stuck. I bring my mom, who died too early and never got to live into the full glory of being

grandmother to my sister's child and mine, beyond their toddling years. I bring the memories of beloved church members who died in the past year— like Ammal. I could always count on her to pray for me when I needed it, and on most days had more than enough faith to cover our most cynical church members. I know the stained glass windows, which filter and soften the light that enters this space, and the very stone and cedar that form these walls, were funded by people who wanted you and me to experience a place of beauty and welcome where God's love would find us and shape us, a place where we could love God back and then go into the world to share that love with our neighbors.

Each Sunday, our faith story invites us to join Jesus, by choosing a journey of love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said if you can figure out how to live into these two commandments, everything else you need to know or do as a person of faith will just fall into place.

But what does it mean to choose love? It's hard to find helpful examples of love these days, when divisiveness and conflict infuse our national discourse, and when so many nations rage with war. Turn on the TV, and I suspect *The Bachelor* or *Love Island* will not help you *love* better; scroll on your phone and you'll be challenged to see any lesson on love that can hold attention beyond a 3 minute TikTok video.

But today's scripture gives us a rich example of love— a love borne of hardship and loss, yes, but one that breathed life into death and sustained generations beyond it with its power.

"There was a famine in the land," begins the story in the Book of Ruth. Here is the reason for the first migration of Naomi, her husband, and their two sons from the land of Bethlehem. As a church that welcomes immigrants from many places, and benefits greatly from their lives and faith, we sometimes hear of their reasons for migration: for school, for love, for a job. Some move because of repression; for example, the Afghan family we sponsored as they resettled in Teaneck left their country because they were not safe politically there; in the past week we hear it has gotten even worse; the Taliban has forbidden women from even talking, one to another. And if we point fingers at another country, we

should also point fingers at ourselves, where we have political pundits say that if a woman secretly casts a vote separate from her husband's choice for president, "that's the same thing as having an affair ... it violates the sanctity of our marriage."<sup>1</sup> If you listen to the story of Ruth and Naomi, you will find out that the power of what women can say to one another can in fact change the world.

I hear some irony in the story that Naomi's family had to move from their Bethlehem home due to a famine, because Bethlehem in Hebrew means "house of bread." But their home was empty of bread, so they had to resettle in the land of Moab— a place where they were in the minority. They were not the first of God's people to flee home due to famine— remember when Joseph's brothers had to travel to Egypt, because of a famine? They also sadly are not the last; even as I preach this word, the current famine in Gaza as they endure a war with no end in sight puts many on the brink of mass starvation.

In the land of Moab, Naomi and her family at last found their fill of bread. Not only that; her sons found love. One son married Orpah; the other married Ruth, both Moabite women. The fact that they married women *of a different culture* shows the writer of Ruth had a different perspective from the mandate in Ezra-Nehemiah, which demanded that marriages between Jewish men and non-Jewish women dissolve.

We quickly find that in Moab, Naomi has lost **everything**— she lost her husband, and then she lost her two sons. It even seems Naomi has even lost her faith. Emptied of joy, she even tells Ruth, "no longer call me Naomi" which means *pleasant*. "Call me Mara" which means *bitter*, "for the Almighty has dealt bitterly toward me. I went away full, but now I come back empty."

Even though Naomi had actually left Bethlehem during a famine, and likely with an empty stomach, she headed back to that home country, perhaps recalling that those were the times that she was full, because she had her loved ones nearby. It's amazing how love can feed us, isn't it? And how hungry we are when it is taken away.

Somehow, looking into the face of all this grief, this emptiness, this hunger, this bitterness, Naomi's widowed daughter-in-law Ruth looks back and draws up love.

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<sup>1</sup> Fox News *The Five Host* Jesse Waters made this statement.

Naomi – who had decided to return to Bethlehem, where the famine is over and she can live with kin– encouraged Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers’ home, where they might each find the chance to marry again, and remain in their own culture, with their own language and gods. But Ruth chooses to place her love and commitment with Naomi, and journey with her to the land where Ruth would be a foreigner from an enemy country, and a childless widow from a mixed marriage. She would forsake her Moabite gods, and honor the one Naomi calls God.

Ruth’s act of love is not the endorphin-producing high that we may feel from falling in love. Her love is born of grit and suffering, and a faithfulness that there is yet more life and more hope than what today may show.

bell hooks wrote about love, “Genuine love is rarely an emotional space where needs are instantly gratified. To know love we have to invest time and commitment...’dreaming that love will save us, solve all our problems or provide a steady state of bliss or security only keeps us stuck in wishful fantasy, undermining the real power of the love — which is to transform us.’ Many people want love to function like a drug, giving them an immediate and sustained high. They want to do nothing, just passively receive the good feeling.”

Ruth’s choice for love in the face of loss became a model for all of Israel. Not only did the Jewish faith uphold her as an example of *hesed*– or steadfast love; Matthew’s gospel lists Ruth as one of only four women mentioned in the genealogy that leads to the birth of Jesus himself, in Bethlehem, that house of bread.

What does it mean to be guided by the principle of love when we head to the ballot box? What does it mean to be guided by the principle of love after whatever gets decided and whatever happens after that?

How will the ways your love is shared **today** impact the ways you will be remembered when *yours* is the unseen presence that people carry with them after your death?

Love God with all your heart, your soul, your mind and your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself.