

“Give Yourself to Love”

Sermon Reprint by Dr. Tess Baumberger
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This sermon is part of a series on values and virtues. Last week I started talking about seven virtues that European and American thinkers have considered to be central to all virtue. Four of these are sometimes called the cardinal or “hinge” virtues upon which our moral lives swing – prudence, fortitude, justice and temperance. The other three are usually called the “theological” virtues – faith, hope, and love.

This sermon is adapted from one I gave five years ago today, the day of my ordination into the Unitarian Universalist ministry. My minister, Rev. Roger Jones, preached at the ordination service in the afternoon, and I chose to preach about the story of Ruth and Naomi at the regular morning service.

I chose to preach on the book of Ruth that day for several reasons. For one, sometimes I like to preach from scripture. This is not something I ever would have imagined upon starting seminary. Back then, I knew I had to study the bible, and was perfectly prepared to find it offensive and yucky. Like so many people in our churches, I had some religious “baggage” from growing up in another faith, as you can see from this attitude of mine.

At times I did find parts of scripture offensive and yucky, but two things caught me unawares. One was learning cool scholarly ways to interpret the bible that take into account the culture and history of the times, that look at the underlying meanings of the words (which I like), and that see scripture as literature. The other thing that caught me unawares was discovering stories, poetry, and words of wisdom in the bible that I found beautiful and compelling.

Anyway, one day over five years ago I rediscovered the story of Ruth, reading again this beautiful and compelling tale about giving yourself to love, even after terrible losses. Since that day, like today, was a day of remembering those we loved who have died, it seemed a perfect theme for the day. Let me tell you a little bit more about why.

The story of Ruth is an old story. Though it was probably written much later, the author sets the book of Ruth in the time of the Judges, who ruled the tribes in ancient

Israel before the time of the kings and the rise of the city-states. Later on, many Jewish people looked back on that time with a sort of nostalgia – seeing it as a time when things were simpler and better.

Whatever its age, this story has themes that run deep and meanings that are rich even in our own time. One theme is there in the title. The name “Ruth” derives from the word meaning “friend” or “companion.” People would have seen this title and guessed that it would focus on relationships. It’s like if we saw a title character named “Faith” or “Hope.”

Another theme in the book of Ruth is *chesed*, a Hebrew word meaning loving kindness and loyalty, or faithfulness. Naomi demonstrates *chesed* when she directs her daughters-in-law to return to their mother’s houses.

There’s more here than meets the modern eye. It turns out that “mother’s house” is an unusual expression– it’s normally “father’s house.” In scripture, the phrase “mother’s house” is associated with women who determine their own fates and the fates of others. By putting that phrase in Naomi’s mouth, the writer signals that Naomi is a strong woman.

When Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to return to their mother’s houses, she’s not being cruel or mean. In fact, she is acting very selflessly. She’s telling them that she wants them to re-marry. You see, women in Near Eastern cultures at that time had no security except through their husbands and sons. Naomi has lost both her husband and her sons, so she has no income, no way of supporting herself. She most likely will be very poor.

She’s looking out for her daughters-in-law by telling them to abandon her and to remarry. Naomi doesn’t have to do that – she could ask them to stay with her and share in her grief, despair and poverty. When women married back then they left their families and became part of their husband’s households. Often they never saw their mothers or fathers again.

By telling them to return to the safety and protection of their mother’s houses, Naomi gives herself to loving concern for her son’s widows. She’s taking the ultimate risk that love demands, the risk of losing someone you love. This is important to know,

because when Ruth chooses to remain with Naomi, she's choosing a financial future that is, at best, uncertain.

This brings us to Ruth's chesed, her act of faithfulness, which is the focus of this reading. The scripture says that Ruth "clings" to Naomi after Orpah leaves. In the Hebrew scriptures, "clinging" is the closest physical position one woman can take to another. This indicates the strength of their bond. Ruth also demonstrates her closeness to Naomi by saying that she will accompany Naomi into that uncertain future, and bind her fate to Naomi's. In this way, Ruth is giving herself to love for her mother-in-law.

In giving herself to loving Naomi like she does, Ruth is not just saying she will abandon her home and family. In a sense she is saying she will abandon her identity as well. When she says "Your people will be my people and your God will be my God." Ruth is doing more than we might imagine.

In those days, people did not convert from one religion to another. Your ethnicity and where you were born determined your religion. If you were Moabite, like Ruth, you worshiped the Moabite gods.

In order to claim Yahweh as her God, Ruth has to become Jewish. She has to renounce the ethnicity of her birth. So Ruth is claiming a new identity founded in love, which can never wholly or truly be hers. She will never be accepted as a true Jewish woman, and she knows this. She is willing to take that risk because this is the way she loves.

The word "love" appears in the book of Ruth only in describing the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. This makes sense because as a virtue, love calls us to be concerned about the welfare of others, which seems to be a hallmark of that relationship. According to ethicist Robin Lovin, "Love is the orientation of individual life to a center outside itself."

Love calls us to value other people as children of the Holy, or if you prefer, as brothers and sisters with their own worth and dignity. Love calls us to help others to bloom and flourish as persons, without becoming dependent on us. Love cares for others without regard to how useful they might be to our own interests.

Ruth embodies the virtue of love. She takes risks. She takes the risk of rejection as a Moabite woman in Judah. She takes the risk of an uncertain future. She takes the

risk of a radical transformation in her personal sense of self, in her religion and her culture. Ruth gives herself to love in ways that were breathtakingly courageous in her time and place.

Why talk about Ruth today, of all days? Because I want to encourage you, you who have loved and have lost so many people dear to you, to follow the example of the young widow Ruth, and take the breathtakingly courageous risk of love again and again and again, despite loss and in the face of grief. I want to encourage you to give yourselves to love.

Does this mean giving so much that you end up being resentful or co-dependent, supporting the people you love in destructive or addictive habits? No, giving yourself to love does not mean that. In fact, it sometimes means saying you cannot be with them or watch them destroy themselves.

Does giving yourself to love mean letting the person you love hurt you or others? No, giving yourself to love does not mean that either. It's not love if you are continually being hurt or made to feel small. The right thing to do in that case is to leave, because you must exercise love of self as well.

Does giving yourself to love mean that the person you love will never hurt you? No. Sometimes we mis-communicate, or we lash out in anger, and we hurt one another. These things happen because we aren't perfect, but we can love one another despite (and maybe because of) our imperfections.

Ruth knew that – when Naomi saw that Ruth wasn't going to abandon her she didn't say, "thank you." The scripture says she just ceased to speak. That might seem kind of cold, but I bet that after ten years, Ruth knew Naomi well enough not to expect thanks in words. It seems to me that Naomi expresses gratitude through actions. She does repay Ruth's devotion later on, by finding her a good and caring husband.

Does giving yourself to love mean that you will never lose another relationship, or person you love? Of course not. Life doesn't work that way. We do lose people to death or distance. Relationships, even with people we love and who love us, sometimes come to an end despite our best efforts. There are no guarantees where love is concerned. It requires a leap of faith.

Giving yourself to love means vowing not to live a closed-up life. Ruth does not close herself to love after her husband dies, leaving her childless. Instead, she opens herself to closeness with her dead husband's mother.

Giving yourself to love requires opening yourself to the possibility of warming your heart in the regard of another person, again. It seems to me that you cannot truly heal from loss unless you do this – love is a cure for grief. Love and time. Giving yourself to love means engaging with others in the hope of love remaining. It means loving again and again, despite losses.

It's true that I decided to preach from the book of Ruth today because this is a day of remembering losses. However, I have other reasons. The last part of the passage we heard today is often read at commitment ceremonies, and five years ago today I made a commitment to being a minister. Ruth's example fits right into this theme of commitment.

At its heart of hearts, ministry is about love, about loving commitment. This is true for all of us that engage in ministry, ordained or not. I believe that we are all ministers, that we share the ministry of this church together. And I believe if we can connect whatever we do in the service of this church to love, it will become more meaningful and feed us even as we serve.

Sure, sometimes the way we minister to each other in a church doesn't look a lot like love - attending meetings, teaching Sunday School, singing in the choir, and making sure the light in the bathroom works. It can be hard to link choosing the right radiator to love, but it truly is a way of showing love, the love we have for the beauty of this building, for the faith that inspires us and above all for the people who gather with us here.

At its deepest level, the ministry we share means committing ourselves through thick and through thin, to the love that unites us, that binds the universe together. When we remember to look for that love, to seek that higher purpose in what we do together, we can see that sacred love thrumming in each other, reverberating through the walls of this church, and hear it singing all around us.

Making this commitment can mean giving ourselves to loving people that may at times be hard to like. We are not perfect. Churches are human communities, and as such

sometimes experience conflict. You who've been here a while know this to be true. If you haven't, well you can think about conflict in the context of a family as well. Facing the reality of conflict in a family or community of faith can be a type of loss. It can be distressing to those of us who expect church or family to be above all that. It can damage our idealistic visions.

Recognizing all this, I'd like to invite you to consider conflict and tension in a different light. Tension is necessary for us to move. If our muscles had no tension we could not breathe, nor sit, nor stand, nor walk, nor dance. If we think of the tension we sometimes feel in our families or church community as creative tension, we can use it to find ways to move.

Certainly conflict can be damaging to us and to our relationships. However, when done well hardship and conflict can become a means of grace. If we do it right, conflict can help us connect to our deeper needs and values in ways that can transform us as spiritual beings, and can recreate our relationships in our religious community or our families.

The challenge for a church or a family that has weathered a conflict, especially one that has left people feeling a little bruised, is to give our selves again to love. The challenge is actively to seek out in ourselves the loving care we feel for one another, until we find the loving kindness that can survive stormy seas.

When we find ourselves together on a shore we never thought to encounter, it means turning to one another with the will to see that sacred love once more, to reconnect with it. It means asking, with genuine concern, "Are you okay? Were you hurt? How can I help? I'm sorry if I hurt you."

Giving ourselves to love after a time of conflict means dedicating ourselves once again to sharing this ministry despite disagreements, forgiving harsh words spoken in the midst of a tempest. The ministry we share is about loving commitment. It is a risk to make this commitment, make no mistake. There are no guarantees. It takes a leap of faith.

The book of Ruth can teach us a great deal about the theological virtue of love. It teaches us that giving yourself to love can be positively dangerous – that is, dangerous in

a positive way. Loving can change your identity radically, as it did for Ruth. Love may ask you to forget everything you ever thought you knew about yourself.

If you give yourself to love, fully and truly, you may find your identity evolving, because loving another person deeply, despite faults and failings, can transform you. If we give ourselves to loving one another in our families, or in this religious community, even through trouble and strife, we may find our families, or this community changing.

When you give yourself to love, really give of your self to love, you may find your self dissolving like a caterpillar's body in a cocoon (which it does). You may feel your self re-forming underneath the surface, until you emerge with a new identify, ready to take wing. Giving yourself to love can change who you are so radically that you won't even recognize yourself.

Giving yourself to love is frightening, it's exciting. It is juicy and full of life and possibility. It is a risky step into the unknown and perhaps the unknowable. The thing is, love is always worth the risk. I think this is the central message of Ruth's story. No matter what it leads you into, what pathways of the heart, love is worth the risk. So give yourself to love, if love is what you're after. Open up your heart to the pain and laughter. And give yourself to love, give yourself to love.

Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons.

The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there.

But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that God had considered God's people (in Judah) and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May God deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. God grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."

But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of God has turned against me."

Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."

But Ruth said, "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. Where you die, I will die-- there will I be buried. May God do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.