

**October 31, 2021**  
**“In Death as in Life”**  
**Ruth 1:1-18 / Mark 12:28-34**  
**Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin**

This really is not a shameless plug for our Monday-night Bible study, but it just so happens that the book of Ruth shows up in the three-year Lectionary cycle only twice – this Sunday and next Sunday. And only a little more than half of the four chapters at that.

Our Bible study group discussed the first chapter of Ruth last week, and as it happens, that's the chapter Amy just read for us this morning. I really didn't plan it that way, but I couldn't have planned it any better!

In Jewish liturgy, the book of Ruth is read annually – all four chapters – during the festival of Shavuot, the spring grain harvest, seven weeks or 50 days (Pentecost) after Passover. It's traditionally read alongside the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, Moses and the Ten Commandments, Exodus 19 and 20.

This beautiful, intimate story of one family's struggle to survive, lifted up within the larger context of the extraordinary, epic story of a people struggling to survive in the wilderness. And called to thrive as a nation in covenant with God.

At the risk of boring those of you who in the Bible study, allow me to quickly summarize the story.

Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons face a famine in their home town of Bethlehem, in their home country of Judah. In search of food and security, they end up in the more fertile country of Moab, on the other side of the Dead Sea, foreign land, historically considered hostile to the Israelites.

Elimelech dies. Her two sons marry Moabite women, one of them being Ruth, and 10 years later both sons also die. It is a beautiful story, but very much rooted in tragedy and loss.

Naomi is left with her two daughters-in-law. They have no legal obligation to her at this point, and with the famine now passed and intent on returning to her home in Bethlehem, Naomi insists they return to THEIR home. At first they both refuse, but after Naomi's second appeal, Orpah obliges and kisses her mother-in-law goodbye. But not Ruth; Ruth CLINGS to her mother-in-law.

And even after Naomi's third appeal to leave her and return home, Ruth digs her heels in. And she does so with a speech for which she is most famous, a speech often shared at weddings (and which I shared last month in officiating the marriage of Gerry's son, Nolan, and her now daughter-in-law, Janice): "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."

This is not one of the Lectionary texts for All Saints' Day, officially observed tomorrow, but the next verse, verse 17, captures the essence, for me, of what we affirm on All Saints' Day.

"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, EVEN DEATH, parts me from you!"

Ruth is rightly celebrated for her undying loyalty and loving-kindness – the Hebrew word, *chesed* – toward her mother-in-law. A loyalty and loving-kindness which eventually stakes her place in the royal lineage of King David, and ultimately of Jesus.

But hear in these words a loyalty and loving-kindness offered and promised even BEYOND death! Not 'til death do us part, but NOT EVEN DEATH will part us.

We can – any of us – promise loyalty and loving-kindness to another until death parts us, but NONE OF US can make such a promise BEYOND death. And yet our experience nonetheless bears out the truth that our loved ones who have died, our saints known personally to us as family and friends and mentors, and those we have not known personally but who have impacted our lives for the better across distance and time, are still with us beyond their deaths.

They who have shown us some measure of faith and love – love like Jesus describes in our reading from Mark, echoing the covenant law presented in Deuteronomy; they continue to journey with us in spirit, even beyond death. Amen!

As we acknowledge during funerals, and as I also did a few weeks ago at the funeral for our dearly departed and beloved brother in Christ, Nelson Jones, death means we have to let go of our loved one's body, but NOT their spirit; their life, but NOT their light.

That profound truth is what we affirm on All Saints' Day – mourning, still, and always, that our saints are longer with us in the flesh, but at the very same time rejoicing that they remain VERY MUCH with us in spirit, to lift OUR spirits. To remind us that we are not alone, NEVER alone, on the journey. That the path before us – as we acknowledged in Singing Our Way In this morning – is already lit.

Two poems come to mind for me every year on All Saints' Day, and drive that truth home. Both powerfully connect the legacy of the saints in the ongoing and collective struggle for justice and beloved community. I'm not gonna share them in their entirety, but you can find them either printed in the bulletin (for those of you in person) or at the end of the bulletin linked on our website.

The first is from Julia Esquivel Velásquez, the Guatemalan poet, theologian and human rights activist, who died a couple of years ago. I have shared her poem, *Nos han amenazado de Resurrección*, translated "They Have Threatened Us With Resurrection," at least a couple of times before at Calvary. I'm sure I'll do it again.

In it she lifts up saints in the ongoing struggle for land reform, economic justice and human rights in Guatemala, preceding and then following the U.S.-backed military coup of a democratically elected government in 1954, and the decades of U.S. military intervention and economic neoliberalism that followed. Undermining democracy and fueling widespread poverty and violence in Guatemala, and similarly throughout Latin America. If you don't know that history, you need to. We all need to.

She lifts up the saints who previously carried the struggle for justice as now threatening resurrection – threatening to come back, in the flesh, if need be, if those still alive don't continue their struggle. It is a profound notion – offering both comfort and challenge.

*They have threatened us with Resurrection  
Because we have felt their inert bodies,  
and their souls penetrated ours  
doubly fortified,  
because in this marathon of Hope,  
there are always others to relieve us  
who carry the strength  
to reach the finish line  
which lies beyond death.*

*They have threatened us with Resurrection  
because they will not be able to take away from us  
their bodies,  
their souls,  
their strength,  
their spirit,  
nor even their death  
and least of all their life.*

*They have threatened us with Resurrection  
because they are more alive than ever before,  
because they transform our agonies  
and fertilize our struggle,  
because they pick us up when we fall,  
because they loom like giants  
before the crazed gorillas' fear.*

And then in closing, she writes:

*Join us in this vigil  
and you will know what it is to dream! **(Remember our reflection last Sunday – the world  
needs more dreamers!)**  
Then you will know how marvelous it is  
to live threatened with Resurrection!  
To dream awake,  
to keep watch asleep, to live while dying,  
and to know ourselves already resurrected!*

Threatened with resurrection! That's the first poem.

The second is actually a Bruce Springsteen song, *We Are Alive*.

In it he lifts up a few examples of those who have lost their lives in the ongoing struggle for human dignity, livelihood and justice:

- A striking railroad worker killed in Maryland in 1877, during a strike that broke out in Baltimore, along the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, that was part of a national railroad strike protesting wage reductions;
- One of the four young African American girls killed in Birmingham in 1963, when the KKK set off a dynamite bomb inside 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, during the ongoing nonviolent direct action campaign protesting racism and segregation. Young girls Dr. King would eulogize as the “martyred heroines of a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity.”
- And finally a representative Latin American migrant who dies crossing the desert in desperate search of a better life for their children, leaving their children behind in a universal San Pablo.

The song, as the title makes clear, affirms that they – the saints – are STILL alive. They who died in the struggle remain with us in our collective struggle, even beyond death.

The chorus resounds:

*We are alive*

*And though our bodies lie alone here in the dark*

*Our spirits rise*

*To carry the fire and light the spark*

*To stand shoulder to shoulder and heart to heart*

And so in our observance of All Saints’ Day, we remember all those we have lost but are still very much with us. Whose love for us even death cannot diminish. Who threaten us with the endless hope of resurrection, and pick us up when we fall. Who continue, now in spirit, to carry the fire and light the spark.

Those who have helped shape who we are individually, and what we know of LOVE IN RELATIONSHIP. Those who have helped shape us collectively, and what we know of LOVE AS JUSTICE.

Friends, as we continue the struggle for, and on the path of, love and justice, the path for which Jesus lived and died, the path lit for us by all the gathered saints, may we find INSPIRATION in their ongoing witness, may we find STRENGTH in their undying spirits, may we find LIFE in their brightly-shining light; with us today and always, even beyond death.

In death as in life. May it be so.