

Ruth, Naomi, & All Our Holy Friendships

Ruth 1:6-9a, 1-18

Sermon Notes from the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
24th Sunday after Pentecost, November 4, 2018
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In the 1930's Martin Niemoller was a Lutheran pastor of a wealthy Berlin suburb. He supported the Nazis until the early 1930's when the government, more and more, meddled in the affairs of the church. At the end of the war after his release from seven years in concentration camps, he wrote this poem:

When the Nazis came for the communists,
I remained silent;
I was not a communist.

When they locked up the social democrats,
I remained silent;
I was not a social democrat.

When they came for the trade unionists,
I did not speak out;
I was not a trade unionist.

When they came for the Jews,
I did not speak out;
I was not a Jew.

When they came for me,
there was no one left to speak out.

Pastor Niemoller may have been a perfectly "polite" neighbor in his comfortable Berlin suburb, but by his own admission he wasn't a very good neighbor to the whole neighborhood. And when he needed a good neighbor, a really good neighbor, a neighbor willing to stand up and for him, it's no surprise he didn't have one. None were left.

I'm new to our neighborhood. And I like what I see.

Our World Mission Team attempts to keep us connected with neighbors around the world. First Presbyterian Church is deepening relationships with mission co-workers and ministry partners in Indonesia, Central Africa, Cuba, and Pakistan. Our Pakistan travel group leaves this week to visit the girls' school in Sangla Hill. Our Cuba travel group leaves in February to stay with friends in our partner church in Havana.

Locally, our Community Mission Deacons keep us helpfully connected with local mission partners—to S.A.F.E. House, Salt & Light, and feeding, immigration, and sheltering ministries all over town.

Our campus houses important mission initiatives. DREAAM House offices are here. The nurturing ministry of Young Lives happens here. AA meets here. We run an ESL program here.

And that's not a full list. We are attempting to be good stewards of both our natural environment (we have a committee for that) and our human relationships, paying particular attention to what Jesus called the least of these.

Being a good neighbor, of course, is an essential calling of the church. For Martin Niemoller that meant being in authentic relationship with the communists, the social democrats, the trade unionists, and the Jews. Each of these groups of people were precisely the people who were outside of his comfort zone. These were people he either disagreed with, didn't like, or didn't care to notice.

But notice we must. We are called to stand with international and community mission partners, with local merchants, and with those who live next door.

On the afternoon of Halloween, five of us from our church walked door-to-door handing out white roses to our neighbors in the 400 block of West Vine. The night before Dondre Moore had been murdered there. These neighbors need us. And as importantly, we need them.

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Naomi was heading back to her home country. The trip would be long. Her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, agreed to go with her, but Naomi urged them to stay in their own country. *You need to make a life for yourselves here, among your own people.*

Both were being a good neighbor to Naomi: honoring her, loving her, standing by her side.

Orpah took Naomi's advice, though, and agreed to stay in her home country. The name "Orpah" interestingly means "Back of the Neck," which is what Naomi saw as Orpah turned to go home.

But Ruth—whose name means "friend" or "companion"—would not leave Naomi. Her speech is often quoted when people speak of Biblical examples of friendship.

(Let congregation say the **bold**)

"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**.¹⁷Where you die, **I will die**-there will I be buried."

We are called to be good stewards of the holy relations God has given us to nurture. That means being a good neighbor. May we never overlook God's call to stand up with and for one another, cultivating friendships, honoring the ties that bind.

That necessarily means getting out of our houses, out of our comfort zones, out of our cliques, and being neighbors to the whole wide world.

Seek justice. Love kindness. And walk humbly with your God.

AMEN.

Ruth 1:6-9a, 16-18

⁶Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷So 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. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband" . . .

¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷Where 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 parts me from you!" ¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.