

Needing Each Other

Ruth 1:16-18

Rev. Dan Schumacher

*Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people;
Your God shall be my God.
Where you die, I will die –
there will I be buried (Ruth 1:16-17).*

How many times have we heard those words read at a wedding?

I had it on my mind a couple of weeks ago when I was at my best friend's wedding. I was watching as these two families with very different backgrounds were being united by marriage. On one side were her parents, Tomás and Patricia, and on the other were his parents, Roy and Becky, and as I looked out over those two families, I couldn't help but think of the words, "Your people shall be my people."

But my best friend Blake and his bride, Natalie, aren't religious, so there weren't any scripture passages read at their wedding. I don't really do many non-religious weddings. I've been asked a few times, and I usually say something like, "You know, you're asking a Christian pastor to officiate your wedding, so you should know that if I do it, you need to expect that I'm going to talk about things like covenant and love and, oh, I don't know, God..."

But thing is, Blake, didn't ask me to officiate his wedding as his pastor. He asked me to officiate his wedding as his best friend.

Blake and I have been best friends since fifth grade, which means that we became best friends just in time to face those awkward "tweenage" years together. You know what I mean. Back then, we both had big, thick glasses. We both had braces. And we both sported bull cuts – you know, when you shave half way up your head and leave the top half longer. Our feet hit their growth spurt before the rest of our bodies, so we both looked like we were walking around with flippers on. And, as our fortune would have it, our voices started cracking uncontrollably at about the same time.

So, as you might imagine, we were irresistible to the ladies.

In my wife's family, they have a term for this awkward age. They call it "dork-teen." We could have been the poster children for "dork-teen."

Blake and I have had a lot of fun together, but we've also been through a lot together.

I was with Blake when I found out that I'd lost my grandad – my dad's dad. It was the first time I'd ever had to face a close family death. My mom and dad had been at the

hospital in Texas with him while he died. I'd stayed at Blake's house while they were gone. Mom called and told me over the phone. I felt like the air had been knocked out of me. I got real dizzy, put hands down on my knees – but before I could collapse, I felt Blake's arm wrap around me and prop me up.

Over twenty years ago, I asked Christen to marry me. When I asked her dad for his blessing, he said, "Well I always hoped that Christen would end up with you... or Blake." Since I was the one asking for his blessing to marry her, I was confused by his comment. I mean, was he still holding out hope for the "Blake" option?

On our wedding day, Blake stood by me as my best man as I married the love of my life. Of course I was going to stand with him – not as his pastor, but as his best friend.

But what Blake and I have been through together – even through all of these years – is nothing compared to what Naomi and Ruth went through.

Their story begins with a severe famine in the land – which is ironic, because that land was Bethlehem, which literally means "House of Bread" or "House of Food." The famine was so bad that a man named, Elimelech, gathered his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, and headed for Moab.

For faithful Israelites, Moab was synonymous with the notion of "Godless country." It was the last place Israelites would have wanted to go. But when you have a family to feed, you go where you have to in order to feed them. So they ventured to Moab in search of food and a chance of survival.

When they got there, things took a tragic turn. Without warning or reason, Elimelech died. Naomi's sons married Moabite women – Orpah and Ruth. But no sooner had they married when the two sons died, too.

Only men could work and make a living in that day and time. Now there were three women – three widows – who were far from home with no food, no shelter, no money, and no protection from the dangers of the world.

What would they do? Would they starve to death? Would they be destitute? Would bandits or other unsavory types take advantage of them? The situation was dire.

With no other logical choice before her, Naomi turned to her daughters-in-law and said, "Go back, each of you to your mother's house." It wasn't a rejection of her Moabite daughters. It was an act of care. She knew that the only way they'd survive was if they went back to the safety of their own clans, their own lodgings, their own people.

So she begged them, "Return to your own people. I can't take care of you."

And though it broke her heart, Orpah did as Naomi had said. “They wept together, Orpah kissed her mother-in-law [goodbye], *but,*” says scripture, “Ruth *clung* to her” (1:14).

And that is when 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;
Your God shall be my God.
Where you die, I will die –
there will I be buried* (1:16-17).

There is, perhaps, no higher model of friendship in all of scripture than this one, and it wasn't born out of laughter and good times and shared hobbies. It was born out of hardship — and *in spite of it*.

The easy road for Ruth would have been to return to her own people, but she chose to cling to Naomi, in spite of the hardship it meant she would face.

You know, all relationships are a choice, and they are the kind of choice that has to be made anew everyday. You choose each day, in small ways and large, whether you will continue a relationship with someone or not.

Will you answer that text? Will you pick up when they call? Will you treat them as equals or make them feel small? Will you be loyal to them? Can they count on you even when the cards are down and their back is against the wall?

Friendships are some of the most important relationships we have, sometimes even more important than family.

Frederick Buechner, says that friends are different than peers, colleagues, acquaintances, and family. “Friends are people you make part of your life *just because you feel like it.*”

I like his sentiment, but I'm not sure I totally agree with his conclusion. Why? Because of Ruth. What Ruth modeled was something more than the kind of friendship that is based on how I *feel*.

The truth is, I can be fickle. I can be overly sensitive sometimes. How I *feel* about my friends can change with direction of the wind. Why would I base something as essential as my friendships on something as casual and unpredictable as my feelings?

Real friends are the people who can hurt your feelings and whose feelings you can hurt, but it doesn't change the fact that you still *choose* each other.

That's why Adele Ahlberg Calhoun suggests that friendship is a spiritual discipline. She points out:

"*Friendliness* is common currency today. We 'friend' one another on social media. User-friendly software always helps. Seeker-friendly churches make everyone feel welcome. And if you are in the eastern part of the United States, you can eat at *Friendly's*.

Friendliness doesn't require loyalties or major investments of time and energy. *Friendliness* may grease the wheels of human interaction, but it is not the same thing as *friendship*.

Friends are not a dime a dozen. They are not the same thing as allies, colleagues, neighbors, relatives and acquaintances. Friends require a degree of intentionality and self-donating love that goes beyond friendliness (*Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, 175)."

That self-donating love has a word in the Hebrew language. It's the word *hesed*. It's often translated as "steadfast love" or "loving kindness," but it really carries with it the idea of a love and a loyalty that extends far beyond what the law requires or anything the recipient expects or deserves. In scripture, it's a word that is usually reserved for God. But Naomi uses the word *hesed* to describe Ruth (1:8).

What would we do without the Ruths of our lives?

The great Patristic father of the of early church, Basil of Caesarea, once said, "The Creator arranged things so that *we need each other*."

What would we do without the Ruths of our lives? I worry about folks who don't feel needed by anyone. I worry even more about those who don't think *they* need anyone.

The Church is the place where we openly and freely admit that we *need* each other.

"As it is," says St. Paul, "there are many members, but only one body. They eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you... But God has so arranged the body... [that] if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it'" (1 Corinthians 12:20, 24, 26).

Over seven years ago, you and I chose each other, didn't we?

During call weekend, we gathered downstairs for breakfast around tables and you all peppered me with questions. And in that time, I told you that this whole call process is strange, because if all goes as it's supposed to, we get engaged on the first date and

we get married on the second. And on that Sunday morning, December 14, 2014, we chose each other. You put a ring on it.

Less than a year after that, I preached a sermon in which I tried to tell you that our relationship was ultimately doomed. I had reached that conclusion because I had come across an article that had proven that familiarity breeds contempt. Do you remember that?

I told you about a group of students from MIT, Boston University, and Harvard who had collaborated on a study to prove that familiarity does in fact breed contempt.

This was a tall order for them, because the belief that the more we know someone the more we will like them has actually been supported by decades of research in modern psychology.

But that belief was running up against a very different reality. If, as modern psychology had supposed, the better we knew someone the more we would like them, was true, then why do we see the disintegration of so many friendships over time, the termination of business partnerships, and what about the prevalence of divorce?

So this young team of thoughtful researchers set out to prove the rather pessimistic theory that familiarity breeds contempt.

Here's how they went about it:

Step one: establish that most people actually believe that familiarity breeds "liking."

To do this, they embedded a link on an online dating website that took willing participants to a simple survey that asked: "Whom do you think you would like more, someone about whom you knew 3 traits or someone about whom you knew 6 traits?"

The results were overwhelming. Over 80% of participants believed that they would more like the person that they knew more about.

Step one: complete.

Step two: prove the opposite was actually true — that familiarity with someone is actually more prone to reduce "liking" (or, as the saying goes, breed contempt).

On the same online dating website, they embedded a link to a survey that invited participants to list between 2 and 20 traits that they thought characterized themselves. They then took those lists of traits and had another sample population rate from 1 to 10 the traits from their collected list (1 wouldn't like at all, 10 would like very much).

The results demonstrated a significant negative correlation between the number of traits that were known and whether that person was deemed likable. The ones who only gave

two traits were more likely to be rated highly likable, while those who gave twenty traits were rated less likable. In other words, the more someone knows about you, the less likely it is that they'll like you. Or: familiarity does, in fact, breed contempt.¹

“So,” I said back then, “there it is. Science has proven it. The longer I’m here, the better we will know each other. And the better we know each other, the less we’re going to like each other.”

But, I was wrong.

I was wrong because our relationship wasn’t built on “liking” each other; it wasn’t built on how we “felt.” It was built on a *word* — a *Hebrew word* — one that extends love and loyalty far beyond what the law requires or either you or I deserve.

When we chose each other, we chose each other in the same model that Ruth chose Naomi — which is, by the way, the same model that God chooses us.

The second goal I have for sabbatical this summer is to reconnect with my friends. It’s to renew my relationship with my wife. It’s to choose *them* again, to choose *her* again — so that when I get back, I am ready to choose *you* again.

And when I get back, I can only hope that you aren’t still holding out hope for the “Blake” option.

Amen.

¹Ariely, Frost, and Norton, “Less is More: The Lure of Ambiguity, or Why Familiarity Breeds Contempt,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, (Vol. 92, No.1: 2007), 97-105.