

## **Following – A Sermon Based on Ruth 1:8-19a**

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The role of a foreigner in a community is an age-old concern. Customs around immigration are various in the Bible, just as they are painfully disputed and conflicted in our country today. Both the reading from the book of Ruth and the story of the ten lepers in the Gospel feature a foreigner as part of the story. Ruth is the young woman from Moab who goes with her Jewish mother-in-law back to Bethlehem, marries into her family and becomes the great-grandmother of King David and hence an ancestor of Jesus. This foreign woman is incorporated into the sacred lineage and the holy history. In the Gospel, it is the Samaritan leper, a foreigner, who alone goes back to thank Jesus for his healing.

These immigrants were a blessing to Israel. They brought loyalty and gratitude and were not excluded or driven out because they were aliens; they were blessed in return. Do these stories have relevance to our immigration problems today? Not really. They fail to capture the complexity of the issue. They make the single rather obvious point that foreigners had their place in the history of Israel, and their adopted communities were the richer for their presence. I'm not prepared to press beyond that one point in connection with immigration. The needed policies to address it are far beyond me.

But I do want to explore the story of Ruth and what she was up to and up against. She made a choice that may, in some ways, be like choices you and I face at one time or another. To quickly review the story, because we heard only part of it: Naomi was Jewish and had gone with her husband and two sons to Moab to escape a famine. The sons had married Moabite wives – Orpah and Ruth – but then Naomi's husband and both sons died. By this time, the famine in Judah was over, and Naomi headed back. The two daughters-in-law started to follow her, but she urged them to stay in Moab. That's where today's passage begins – all the part about Naomi having more sons was about the ancient Jewish custom which said if a man died and left a widow, his next brother should take her as a wife and father her children. Naomi was referring ironically to how long and unlikely it would be that she could bear any more sons to marry these women. She begs them to stay in Moab and find security and a husband there. Orpah agrees, tearfully, but Ruth insists on going with Naomi. Her beautiful words of commitment to Naomi, to her people and to her God, even to a final resting place in Judah are well known. "Where you go, I will go..." and so forth. Not surprisingly, they are sometimes used at weddings to signify the kind of commitment a wife and husband might make to each other, but this is really a vow of loyalty from a younger to an older woman, each from a different culture.

We can wonder about Ruth's motivation. Was it simply affection for Naomi and a desire or sense of duty to care for her? Was it the hope of finding better candidates for marriage than in Moab – surely women relocate for that reason today! Was Ruth hungry for new life and adventure – willing to step out boldly into the unknown? How could she know whether Naomi's people would welcome her or treat her as an alien outcast? Ruth's decision to follow Naomi changed her life, but she couldn't possibly know, when she made it, how things would turn out, or whether it would prove to be a good decision. The only information she seemed to have was what she knew of Naomi – having lived with her for ten years. Did Ruth make her decision because of a relationship?

What would you do? When have you faced a decision to follow – a person, a job opportunity, a religious path? These choices can be precarious, and certainly following a person or an opportunity or an ideology blindly can be disastrous. You don't know enough about it, or your assumptions can distort the reality of what you are choosing. Some divorces result from mistaken perceptions about what a partner is really like, or what marriage itself really entails. And job decisions? I still remember my father's sense of betrayal when he moved our family from Philadelphia to Bethlehem, PA for what seemed a hugely promising job, only to have it all fall apart in less than a year. He really had known nothing about the parent company and their plans to bankrupt the Bethlehem office for their own purposes.

Decisions to follow a cause, an ideology, a religion, can be just as risky. There are cults; there are demagogues; idolatry is alive and well today. You're looking for a spiritual path, but you don't want to get sucked in or told what you have to believe. How much information do you need to know whether Christianity, or the Episcopal Church, or some other denomination or faith is for you? Again, following blindly can get you in trouble.

I go back to the Ruth story here to remind us that the only thing that was not blind in her decision to follow Naomi was their friendship. She had a relationship with her mother-in-law that was substantial enough to go on. Ruth trusted Naomi enough to go with her wherever – and perhaps she also needed to trust herself enough to expect she could do what she promised.

Is it relationship that we need in order to step into new life, to follow a call? Tested, honest relationships probably make for better marriages. My own decision to seek ordination was in large part because of a friendship with an older priest whom I admired tremendously. And, when it comes to choosing a faith, or a church – what guides us? So often it is relationship – with people in

the community, with the clergy, with the friend who invited you to come. Is your own spiritual seeking compatible with these others as companions on the way?

In all these situations, human relationship can be what helps us decide, draws us in, keeps us loyal. But at the end of the day – these relationships are not ultimate goals, not the end of all our desiring. These people change, or we do, or they move away and out of our lives, or they die. No human relationship can have ultimate value and not disappoint in the end – because it will end.

But notice that at the heart of Christianity is relationship, relationship with Jesus – with one who came to us just as human as we are, and all of his first followers came along because of relationship – not ideas, not a philosophy, not a creed, but because of healings and acceptance and invitations and love offered. Jesus promised connection with God through following him, and because of his being in the flesh, the choice to follow him was not blind for those first disciples. And because what Jesus offered was the fullness of God's never-ending love, here on earth, people could follow something that would never fail them. Even today, the life death, judgment and teachings of Jesus give us something to go on which take us beyond humanism, beyond idolatry, beyond disembodied spirituality.

If you have chosen Christianity; if you have chosen this community as your spiritual home; if you are thinking about being welcomed as a new member in two weeks, you have engaged seriously in a following as important as any you'll ever make. This following – of the holiness and mystery of God – through the person of Jesus Christ is the journey of an entire lifetime. It should help you as you face all the other important followings and commitments of the journey. And this following, despite doubts and hard places and impossible questions, will not fail you.

I began following Jesus and became a serious Christian thirty-seven years ago. A person, and a church community, then reading and study and spiritual guides and other church communities have all been part of it. But they have come and gone, and they will – yet I still embrace Jesus as a way, and a truth and a source of life whom I am willing to follow always, and I give thanks for the grace that helps me do this. Amen.