

Several weeks ago when I introduced my sermon series on The Journey that I said our journeys through this life are ultimately solitary. In a very profound sense your passage through this life is yours and yours alone. Only you can make certain choices, decisions, actions that determine your destiny. Only you can find the true purpose and meaning of your life on this earth.

However..... while the journey is solitary in many respects, it is also shared. While other people cannot experience what we experience, they can and do offer us support, strength, and companionship along the way. Human beings were created for relationship and community, we were created to share our hopes and fears, dreams and ideas with others.
We were created for connection.

And that brings us to one of my favorite books in the Bible–The book of Ruth. It is only 4 chapters long, and was written during a time of great nationalistic fervor in Israel when the law mandated that Jews could not marry outside of their own race. Therefore, anyone married to a non-Jewish wife must divorce her immediately, and get all children from the marriage out of the country. This of course consigned non-Jews to a life of humiliation and poverty.

The author of Ruth clearly sees the intolerance behind such a law, and writes this story as a powerful statement against it. Ruth begins with Elimelech, a native of Bethlehem, and a good Jew. His wife is Naomi, and they have two sons. A famine comes to the land, forcing them to move to Moab. Elimelech dies, and the two sons marry Moabite women. Then the two sons die.

Naomi is left with no husband and no sons, and this was **not** an enviable position for a woman in those days. Plus, Naomi now has two foreign daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

After the deaths of her husband and sons, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem alone. Her daughters-in-law insist upon going with her. Naomi is able to talk Orpah out of going, but Ruth is insistent. Her pledge to her mother-in-law Naomi is one of the most beautiful statements in all of Scripture.

Ruth says, “Do not force me to leave you, or return from following you,
for where you go I will go, where you live I will live,
your people shall be my people and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.”

Even though she is a Moabite who married a foreigner, Naomi is now her family.
She will gladly go to a strange and foreign land where she is not welcome.
She will honor Naomi in the most profound and lasting of ways by completely
sharing her journey.

It is an unlikely affiliation--two widows from different countries, faiths and
backgrounds. A mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, who become true family.

This story is a powerful antidote to every mother-in-law joke ever told.
It has always bothered me the way that step-mothers and mothers-in-law are
portrayed in our culture.

Incidentally, does anyone know who wrote and performed the hit song “Mother-
In-Law” from 1961? Ernie K. Doe. This very popular song was #1 on the
Billboard Charts and says, in part:

“The worst person I know—mother-in-law, mother-in-law.
Sent from down below—mother-in-law, mother-in-law.”

Not very encouraging for those of us who are or will be mothers-in-law.

But Ruth and Naomi give us another perspective. They knew that there is family
by blood, family by marriage, and family by choice. They knew that redemption is
found in relationship, and nothing matters more.

They learn that love is stronger than any obstacle, any difference or division.
And that is exactly the sort of love we celebrate this World Communion Sunday,
when we think of our sisters and brothers in Kenya and Kansas, Africa and Asia,
coming to open fields and to great cathedrals to find inspiration, nourishment and
strength at a universal table symbolic of God’s love for us.

As we journey through this life it is a blessing to share the journey with those who
are like us, and those who are different from us.

Now, one of the most uniquely American contributions to spirituality,
in addition to Native American spirituality, are 12-Step programs.

There are a plethora of groups branching off from the original one:
Alcoholics Anonymous. Today you can find a wide variety of 12-Step programs
that draw people together to share their experience, strength and hope.
The non-judgmental support of others in similar circumstances allows people to

deal with not only addictions, but loss and grief. The heart of these support groups is a profound spirituality, which includes service to others and a deep dependence upon God.

As people come together to share their journeys they find inspiration and transformation.

So it is a very good thing to share the journey with those who are like us and have experienced similar struggles and successes.

But it is also important to share the journey with those who are very different from us, those whose experience in life we find unfamiliar and strange.

We know that God's world is colorful and diverse and that difference is blessing.

By reaching out to those who are different, our own reality is expanded and enriched. It is essential for us to reach out to those whom we find strange, just as Jesus did.

In Jesus day it was Samaritans, lepers, the poor, the outcast, the possessed.

For us it might be people of different ethnicity, economic condition, religious faith or sexual orientation, but we owe it to God and ourselves to share the journey with those who are vastly different, those whom we may not understand.

There is a moving scene in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, that classic book about the brutal savagery of World War I.

In this scene, a German soldier jumps into a trench, only to find an English soldier laying there, badly wounded.

The German soldier instinctively grabs his rifle in order to kill this enemy, but the English soldier reaches into his pocket and pulls out some pictures. He shows the German soldier the pictures of his wife and two small children. The German soldier immediately drops his gun and offers this wounded man a drink from his canteen.

Suddenly this hated enemy is seen as a fellow traveler with hopes, dreams, and people who love him. Maybe he is not an enemy after all.

If only we could get into a trench with someone we disliked or feared and learn about their life. The world would look very different indeed.

Not too long ago a Palistinian priest named Elias Chacour led a worship service at his church in Israel.

Within this church there were those who were at great odds, because they vehemently disagreed about politics—hard to imagine, I know.

Chacour was tired of the constant infighting, so at the end of the worship service, he got up and locked the two doors of the church.

He told the congregation that he loved them dearly, but could no longer tolerate their hatred and bitterness toward one another.

He said that those who fully trusted in Christ could bring about the miracle of reconciliation.

He said, “The doors of this church are locked. Either you **kill** each other right here, and I will officiate at all of your funerals, or you use this opportunity to reconcile with one another.

It is your choice, but you must decide before I will let you out of this church.

About ten minutes passed, and nobody said a word.

They sat in stony silence, locked in their church by their own priest.

Finally, one man stood up. His name was Abu Muhib, an Israeli police officer in uniform.

He said, “I need to ask forgiveness from everyone here. I have done things of which I am not proud. I pray that God can forgive my terrible sins.

And I also know that I need to forgive everyone here, so I forgive you all.”

Abu and the priest embraced, and within minutes everyone in the room was laughing and hugging for the first time in many years.

Their priest announced, “This is the resurrection. This is the new life Christ offers us. I will unlock the doors and you must share this new life with everyone you meet.”

If only the whole world could understand the transformation that occurs when you take the time to share the journey, even with a so called enemy.

The book of Ruth gives us a glimpse of two foreign widowed women, who had race, religion, nationality and gender all working against them.

And yet they were determined to stay together and create a new life.

It was risky indeed for these two women to set off together in such an intolerant culture. But the story has a very happy ending.

After their return to Bethlehem, Ruth is introduced to Boaz, one of Naomi’s relatives by marriage.

Boaz is prominent, wealthy, a man of integrity and honor.

Ruth and Boaz fall in love, marry, and are blessed with a son.

This grandson becomes the light of Naomi’s life, and makes her young once again.

The book of Ruth ends with these words: “Naomi took the baby and held him in her arms, cuddling him, cooing over him, waiting on him hand and foot.

The neighborhood women all called him “Naomi’s baby boy,” but his real name was Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse and Jesse the father of David.” And of course you know that the line of Jesse and David is the line of Jesus Christ, that one who shares the journey with us, and is here to bless us now.

So, on this World Communion Sunday, let us remember that we are all related, and our journeys through this life are much better when shared.

Thanks Be To God! Amen.

Today is a special day for the family of Christ. Because in nearly every Christian church believers are receiving the Bread of Life and cup of Blessing. We come to a table that cuts through all divisions and hatreds to receive a Sacrament that tells us we are dearly loved.

In the United Methodist Church communion is open to all people. You do not need to be a member of this or any church to be welcome at the table of the Lord.

Please join me in the Unison prayer for Communion which will be on the screens:

God of all creatures and all creation; God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob, Sarah, Ruth and Naomi, God of those who went before us and those who will come after us: Today we join with Christians all over this world in coming to a table that cuts across all division, prejudice, and strife. We celebrate the gift of unity that we have in Jesus Christ. He came to bring us abundant and eternal life, and to make your love real. On his last night on earth he took bread, gave it to his disciples and said: “This is my Body broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” Likewise, he took the cup and gave it to them, saying: “This is my Blood shed for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me.” After he rose from the dead, he appeared to the disciples in the breaking of the bread. He promised to be with us always in the breaking of the bread. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon all of us gathered here, and upon these good gifts of the earth. Through them, help us to be one with You, one with each other, and one in unity with our sisters and brothers everywhere. Amen.