

Tell Me A Story: Of Loss and Love
Ruth 1.10-18
Sunday, June 29, 2014
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church
Elizabeth Mangham Lott

Of the mystery of love, poet WH Auden asked:

When it comes, will it come without warning
Just as I'm picking [out clothes]?
Will it knock on my door in the morning,
Or tread in the bus on my toes?
Will it come like a change in the weather?
Will its greeting be courteous or rough?
Will it alter my life altogether?
O tell me the truth about love.

My husband and I marked our 13th wedding anniversary and the 15th anniversary of our first date in April of this year. We have traveled together from college sweethearts with big dreams for the world to 30-something parents with big dreams for one day having a night out on the town. From Birmingham to Richmond to New Orleans: it's a wild adventure, this life together, and Nathan is a most excellent companion on the journey. He and our children, Turner and Julia, teach me daily the truth about love.

I have learned from them that I can be at my very loving best and at my very hard-to-love worst all in one day. My heart is not my own anymore because I love them so. They carry pieces of me around with them, and that is all-at-once beautiful and terrifying. There is so much I have gained and so much I could lose. They are teaching me contentment and priorities and the gift of living in the present moment.

The community at St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church knows these truths and more. We have spent the past nine days sharing love stories with one another as we have begun grieving the loss of John Yarborough. We gathered in this room yesterday to testify to that great love: generosity of spirit, beauty of music, love in a half-century of marriage, love for family and friends, love of God, God's love for us, and the impact a person who loves endlessly can have on a world.

When you know someone as well as so many of you knew Johnny, life is forever changed. And when you lose someone as big and alive and dynamic a personality as Johnny, the loss forever changes you, too. We are living out some lessons here in this

place that have eternal consequences. There are risks to loving deeply and effortlessly and without hesitation: risks of saying goodbye, of being transformed, of becoming one's truest, best self because you have learned the truth about love.

AN ANCIENT STORY:

In the morning's text, Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, are standing together after their husbands have died. They find themselves in peril without the protection of men, and the three must decide how to move forward. They have been living in the country of Moab, but Naomi is from the land of Judah and plans to return home. She instructs her daughters to stay in Moab to find security with new husbands, but they weep to go with her. This ancient story shows us that the characters' love for each other is a vow of fidelity. That love is not easy and comes with potential consequences.

Ruth's choice was a risk. At the very least, she was moving toward the unknown. Perhaps she thought that was better than what she did know in Moab, but the text doesn't help us there. Orpah returned to her Moabite family just as Naomi implored, but Ruth refused. Why? Women were not autonomous individuals in this time. These two women were at risk as they moved forward without the care of men. Perhaps Ruth risked her security to ensure Naomi's. After all, Naomi lost the provision of her husband and the respected identity that came from mothering two sons. It seems she had little to offer Ruth beyond the loving relationship they shared.

As the story goes, Ruth does travel with Naomi, and the two work together in securing a future. Naomi guides Ruth to family land where she can glean at the edge of the fields. This means she arrives at the land as a beggar and a stranger and collects what is left behind from the harvest. When Boaz, the landowner, hears of how Ruth has been faithful to Naomi, he then cares for her by instructing his women workers to drop extra grain for Ruth and instructs Ruth to follow them closely. Boaz, informed by faith in the one, true God, practices God's mandate to love as he cares for the widow and stranger in his midst. That way of love flowed naturally from him because it was a way of life.

A PORT WILLIAM STORY:

Wendell Berry's short-story "Fidelity" is found in a collection of the same name. If you aren't familiar with Berry's fiction, he has written numerous short stories and essays set in the town of Port William, Kentucky. Port William is a farming community that moves at a slower pace than with which most of us are familiar or comfortable, and

Berry's characters are often begrudgingly engaging the modern realities of American life: bureaucracy, capitalism, progress, efficiency.

In this story, Burley Coulter (Uncle Burley) is an 82-year-old man who is dying. His family decides they will take him to the doctor, though that is not standard practice for Burley and the old ways. The family soon find themselves around a hospital bed watching Uncle Burley breathing with the aid of machines and tubes attached to various parts of his once strong and able body.

One night, Burley's son Danny is lying awake beside his wife, Lyda, both unable to sleep for thoughts of the mechanized room where Burley lay. Finally, Danny gets up and starts to dress telling his wife, "Go back to sleep, Lyda. I'm going to get him." Lyda "did not ask who. She said 'Good,' which made him look at her but he did not say more."

Danny gathers the supplies he'll need, arranges the dogs, and tells his wife that she and the kids will "have to do the chores and look after things." Having said little about his plan, he tells his wife, "If somebody wants to know, I've said something about Indiana." With that, Lyda slept and Danny drove away. At two in the morning, Danny enters the hospital and grabs an empty gurney. He goes to his father's room and whispers, "Listen. I'm going to take you home. Don't worry. It's me. It's Danny." He withdraws tubes and tape and needles, moves Uncle Burley onto the gurney, and covers him with a bed sheet. He moves past a distracted nurse, enters the elevator, and leaves the hospital with his father.

The word quickly spreads through the township of Prince William that Danny has gone off to Indiana, and there is an immediate, unspoken understanding of what that means. No questions, just an understanding. A friend and community "country lawyer of sorts", Henry Catlett, is prepared to speak with police officials on the family's behalf.

Meanwhile, Danny takes his father to the old barn at the Stepstone Hollow, a family place. All the while he talks to his sleeping father about where they are. He arranges him comfortably in the barn, then Danny moves quickly preparing for the coming day. He walks back into the barn to "Burley's opened eyes, looking at him."

"Burley's eyes were perfectly calm; he was smiling. Slowly, pausing to breathe between phrases, he said, 'I allowed you'd get here about the same time I did.'

'Well, you were right,' Danny said. 'We made it. Do you know where you are?'

Again, smiling, Burley spoke, his voice so halting and weak as to seem not uttered by bodily strength at all but by some pure presence of recollection and will: 'Right here.'"

“‘You’re right again,’ Danny said, knowing that Burley did know where he was.” And Danny left for the spring to draw water for both of them. “When he returned, Burley’s eyes were closed again....It was as though his soul, like a circling hawk, had swung back into this world on a wide curve...and then had swung out of it again, the curve widening.”

Danny gathered “his tools and went up into the woods and began to dig.” Danny continued to dig and stopped periodically to check on his father. “And finally, on one of these trips to the barn, he knew as he entered the doorway that the breaths had stopped.”

“He went back to his digging and worked on as before.” But now “It was as though Burley stood in full view nearby, at ease and well at home—as though Danny could see him but only on the condition that he not look.”

Back in town, the police begin to question Burley’s friends and family and quickly suspect that Danny is involved. The uncooperative friends all say, “I don’t know. He said something about Indiana,” and no more.

The police officer, Kyle Bode, questions Henry Catlett and is increasingly frustrated by the conversation. They argue about whether or not such an act is kidnapping. Committed to the law and to protocol, Officer Bode reiterates that Uncle Burley’s removal was not authorized. “It was a crime. You can’t let people just walk around and do what they want to like that. He didn’t even pay the bill.”

To which Henry replies, “Some of us think people belong to each other and to God.”

A COMMUNITY STORY:

Increasingly, reports and studies and articles indicate that fewer people find church to be relevant. Spirituality can be fully experienced and practiced anywhere, people say. I suppose we don’t need another study or survey to tell us what we have witnessed personally. Any pastor or lifelong parishioner knows that folks don’t come to church like they used to. But I think that’s largely because we churches emphasized the wrong things for a long time—checking boxes on an envelope as though a weekly to-do list was what might bring us closer to the divine. Those checklists were always a lot easier and safer than making vows of love and fidelity to be God’s people.

Because what we really believe is that we belong to each other and to God. When we gather weekly for worship and study, we're working toward a way of loving faithfulness.

The love we discover here is about settling in for life together. It's a slowness, an unfolding of ourselves, a resistance to the dominant culture's blessing of fierce independence. We can explore any number of methods of spirituality on our own. But we learn the truth about love from allowing ourselves to settle into a place.

Choosing community here stretches us and changes who we are. Or perhaps better than saying being in community changes us, maybe the truth is that it makes us more fully ourselves. Because in a relationship where vows have been exchanged and promises have been made, the hope is that we are growing into a fullness of self as we discover love for one another, love for God, and God's love for us.

In churches as in marriages, some of us do not always agree. At times a couple of us have some flat out head-butting sessions and hurt each other deeply. But we face those hurts and those chasms of disagreement with affection and grace and a promise to make a way forward, to speak more lovingly next time, and to abide together as a people.

It's tempting to believe that some other group of people out there loves better or does church the "right" way. Or that our lives might become drama free if we let go of these entanglements here. In his book *Under the Unpredictable Plant*, Eugene Peterson writes of the dangers of fantasizing about a church that does not exist; "a glamorization of the local church," like an airbrushed picture in a magazine, that highlights a place "without spot or wrinkle." We have spots. We have wrinkles. So, like a dear friend of mine says, this is a place where we can let all of our fat parts hang out. We love each other as we truly are, we call out what is best in each other, and we don't make claims on perfection here. We're living into the way of Christ here, and one way we do that well is by loving grandly.

We are committed to a "stick-with-it-ness" in our relationships, in a place, to a community, to the realities of imperfection among us, to the hope and promise that God is at work here, and opening ourselves up to one another in the fullness of love that we might be changed into fuller, transformed, more mature versions of our former selves.

Like Ruth to Naomi, we whisper vows here as we give ourselves to each other: where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and

your God my God...if even death parts me from you. We are vowing to learn the truth about love.

Maybe following Naomi wasn't a mandate from God. We don't know what Ruth's options were if she returned to her own people. But we know she risked something to follow Naomi. Like the people of Port William, Ruth believed that people belong to each other and to God.

If we risk that kind of love here, we are risking a transformed life that creeps out from our hearts to the ways we care for family, for friends, for the poorest among us at the edge of the field.

Divine love takes hold of MY life and MY space and MY wants and MY needs...and reframes the way you and I see the world. We belong to each other and to God; it's a risk to live out that kind of faith. It's a risk to settle in and stay a while.

The story of Ruth, like too many Biblical narratives, gets relegated to a children's tale of once upon a time in a land far away where faithful Ruth was rescued by the brave, strapping Boaz. But that's not really the story at all. This is a snapshot of a fidelity that God is inviting us to live into and that God lives out with us.

What might happen in this place, in your homes, in private closet of your own heart if you were to risk it all and practice that kind of loving faithfulness together? What might be unlocked in this place? What might be unleashed in this world? What might happen through us, in Jesus' name?