

“Whithersoever Thou Goest”

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UCC at The Villages, FL  
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23<sup>rd</sup> Sun. after Pentecost  
All Saints Sunday

Ruth 1:1, 3-8, 14-18

John 11:32-44

*[Ruth 1:6 in the King James Version...]*

*And Ruth said,*

*‘Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee:*

*for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge:*

*thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Ruth 1:6*

Let us pray... O God,

As the Psalmist said, if we go up into the heavens, you are there;

or like Jonah, if we descend into the depths, you are there, too.

There is no place where you are not – yet so often we are deaf & blind to your presence.

Help us to open our hearts to see how you are already there.

Amen

‘Whither thou goest...’ is the phrase that the King James Version of the Bible uses to interpret Ruth’s determination to follow Naomi, her mother-in law,

from Moab across from the Dead Sea back to Bethlehem of Judah.

I first heard this passage at the wedding of dear friends, Al & Angelee Benner-Smith, who were fellow classmates at Lancaster Theological Seminary.

It is one of the few passages that really work as inspirational texts for weddings – though it does not refer to marriage at all.

Ruth’s brief speech to her mother-in law is about the commitment between two people to “be there for one another”.

No matter where you go, I’m there with you. I’ve got your back. I’m with you...

‘Whither thou goest...’ ‘Whithersoever thou goest...’

‘Whithersoever’... I love that word!

It is not exactly the same as the phrase used in this verse from the Book of Ruth, but carries the same sense of commitment that is also found in

the King James Version of Joshua 1:9...

*[The LORD said,]*

*Have not I commanded thee?*

*Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed:*

*for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.*

‘Whithersoever thou goest...’

This time, the commitment that is expressed,

is the commitment that God promises to us...

Willard, p.2

Now, just to kind of stretch this metaphor a bit,  
perhaps you have read that greeting card sentiment that goes like this,  
'No matter where you go, there you are'.

To that, we could add what our church says,  
'No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey,  
you're welcome here.'

So, whosoever you are and whithersoever you go  
God welcomes you and accompanies you, too – so to speak,  
but don't we still bring a lot of things with us...

'No matter where you go, there you are' implies that though we might  
change our surroundings or the things with which we surround ourselves,  
the person whom we are *inside* does not change.

We come with the same baggage psychologically from wherever  
we left geographically – and that doesn't change unless we change it.

I remember reading a short story in elementary school  
about President Dwight David Eisenhower when he was a cadet at West Point  
and that he had said,

*"The hardest journey is from your head to your heart..."*

A Native American friend once said the same thing to me,  
and in trying to find the original source of this quote,

I happened to find one similar attributed to  
the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers;

And their version goes like this:

*"The hardest journey is from your head to your heart,  
but once you get there, you'll know who you are."*

The journey we all make is from the womb to the tomb and –

if we are fortunate, we find people like Ruth who are committed to literally walk  
that walk with us as a parent or sibling or spouse or true friend.

We are fortunate when we recognize and can appreciate

those whom God sends like lights to guide us for portions of that journey.

Hopefully, we can be such guiding lights ourselves to help others on their path...

Today's Gospel lesson is one of my favorites –

part of the story about Jesus' raising Lazarus from death back to life.

It is also a love story as it suggests a special relationship

between Mary of Bethany and Jesus.

Perhaps one the most intriguing details of this story is how Jesus weeps,  
responding to the grief of others, by grieving himself and in so doing,  
allows himself to become fully human.

Willard, p. 3

Jesus makes that journey from head to heart by grieving  
and in so doing, he sets an example, for us to follow, too, as the need arises.  
Having one's heart broken – to love and grieve,  
is what essentially makes us human...

In the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is focused on his mission  
and seems to have a clear perspective of what awaits him.  
He talks to his disciples about death as a kind of sleep;  
and when Martha confronts him for being too late to heal her brother,  
he coolly informs her that he will raise up her brother.

Indeed,  
he tells Martha he is the one who will raise up human beings in the time to come,  
and that for those who believe that Jesus is who he claims to be,  
they will not be disappointed,  
nor will they die a second death in the time to come.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus pre-existed  
and so, he was present with God as Creation unfolded, and  
that we are to believe he is uniquely part of Who God is.  
As the Gospel narrative unfolds about him, those who refuse to believe in him,  
grow in their animosity towards him.  
During one confrontation, he tells them, 'Before Abraham was, I am!'  
provoking his enemies to try and stone him,  
because he has essentially applied the name of God –  
*I Am, I Am That I Am*, to himself.

This also gives us a clue to what Heaven is like and that the time to come is always –  
now, the present moment, as if God could have access to all the millions of years  
that have unfolded so far, like any of us who can take a book off a shelf  
or watch a video online to freeze a frame, to fast forward, or rewind at will.

Jesus seems to understand all this, in complete control of his thoughts and emotions  
about the terrible course events still before him of trial and crucifixion.  
It is clear in the 6<sup>th</sup> Chapter of John, that Jesus' greatest fear was not death,  
but whether or not the disciples would understand – would they get it?  
He tells a crowd that has come looking for a free meal –  
hoping he will turn 5 more loaves of bread into breakfast.  
However, they are scandalized by his statement that his body is bread to be eaten  
and his blood is to be poured out as a drink!  
So, they depart from him – perplexed, while Jesus turns to his disciples  
at what is one of the most poignant scenes in the Bible  
when he asks his 12 Disciples, 'Will you also go away?'  
Then, Peter speaks up – and speaks for them all when he says,  
'To whom shall we go? [almost as if to say, "Please tell us!"]',

but then he says...] for you have the words of eternal life!’

Willard, p.4

Jesus knew what he would face and understood these deep truths,  
but why did he cry?

Perhaps, he did not yet experience how Lazarus’ death would affect others –  
especially, people he knew and cared about.

Because when you know somebody, it makes a difference –  
it’s no longer about religious theory, when it is about people you love...

So, Jesus raised Lazarus from death like he was waking him up from sleep,  
as he would yet do again for Lazarus – and for us all  
in whatever shape things take then, in the time to come.

Jesus will be there for us, too – God through Christ is with us now  
whosoever we are and whithersoever we go on the road to Heaven...

Amen

*Our lesson from Ruth 1:1, 3-8, 14-18 describes the choices made by three women:  
one to return to her own culture, another who embraced a new culture,  
and a third who welcomed the stranger...*

<sup>1</sup>During the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land.  
A man with his wife and two sons went from Bethlehem of Judah  
to dwell in the territory of Moab [Mo'-ab].

<sup>3</sup>But Elimelech [Elly-may'-leck], Naomi's husband, died.  
Then only she was left, along with her two sons.

<sup>4</sup>They took wives for themselves, Moabite women;  
the name of the first was Orpah and the name of the second was Ruth.  
And they lived there for about ten years.

<sup>5</sup>But both of the sons, Mahlon [Ma'-lawn] and Chilion [Chilly-on], also died.  
Only the woman was left, without her two children and without her husband.

<sup>6</sup>Then she arose along with her daughters-in-law to return from the field of Moab,  
because while in the territory of Moab she had heard  
that the LORD had paid attention to his people by providing food for them.

<sup>7</sup>She left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law went with her.  
They went along the road to return to the land of Judah.

<sup>8</sup>Naomi said to her daughters-in-law,  
"Go, turn back, each of you  
to the household of your mother.  
May the LORD deal faithfully with you,  
just as you have done with the dead and with me.

<sup>14</sup>Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law,  
but Ruth stayed with her.

<sup>15</sup>Naomi said,  
"Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and to her gods.  
Turn back after your sister-in-law."

<sup>16</sup>But Ruth replied,  
"Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you.  
Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay.  
Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.

<sup>17</sup>Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.

May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you."

<sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her,  
she stopped speaking to her about it.

*Let us be guided and challenged by these words...*

John 11:32-44

<sup>32</sup>Then Mary, when she came where Jesus was and saw him, fell at his feet,  
saying to him,

“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

<sup>33</sup>When Jesus saw her weeping, and the [Judeans] who came with her also weeping,  
he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled; <sup>34</sup>and he said,

“Where have you laid him?”

They said to him,

“Lord, come and see.”

<sup>35</sup>Jesus wept.

<sup>36</sup>So the [Judeans] said,

“See how he loved him!”

<sup>37</sup>But some of them said,

“Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man  
have kept this man from dying?”

<sup>38</sup>Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb;

it was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

<sup>39</sup>Jesus said,

“Take away the stone.”

Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him,

“Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.”

<sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her,

“Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?”

<sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone.

And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said,

“Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.

<sup>42</sup>I knew that thou hearest me always,  
but I have said this on account of the people standing by,  
that they may believe that thou didst send me.”

<sup>43</sup>When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice,

“Laz’arus, come out.”

<sup>44</sup>The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with bandages,  
and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them,

“Unbind him, and let him go.”

As it says in Hebrews 4:14-16...

<sup>14</sup> Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens,  
Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

<sup>15</sup> For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses,  
but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

<sup>16</sup> Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,  
that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

## GREETING

This is traditionally the season of harvest  
and we as a church are harvesting the efforts sown throughout the year.

Last Sunday was Harvest Sunday  
when we welcomed our friends from Calle de Milagros.

That is a relationship that I hope will bear good fruit –  
not only for us as a congregation,  
but our Conference and the Florida farmworker community as well.

Since then, this church was transformed by the hard work and  
contributions of many volunteers to have a successful Yard Sale  
and we will hear about how good a harvest it was  
at our Congregational Meeting after the service.

This summer has been especially busy for those of us working to plan how we  
can organize and conduct our business as a church more efficiently –  
most notably, our Moderator, Ken Rhodes, has guided this work.  
and we will hear more about this at the Congregational Meeting as well.

This is also a time of 'planting' and inspiring generosity among us  
as our season of Stewardship begins.

Ray Peidl will be presenting a Stewardship moment later in the service  
for how we can best provide the resources for all the wonderful ministries  
and events that we do...

## OPENING PRAYER

Almighty & merciful God,

Be with us now in this quarterly review and projection of needs  
for our church to better serve you through inspiring worship,  
nurturing pastoral care, responsible administration,  
wise allocation, and effective education and proclamation  
for the faithful performance of our mission  
as a congregation of the United Church of Christ. Amen

## CLOSING PRAYER

Gracious and glorious God,

Through Christ, we can do anything you have set before us  
to achieve.

Go with us whithersoever the path takes us  
as individuals and as a congregation as we look forward  
to the Advent Season of Christmas hope & light.

Amen