

Mark 12:28-34

Ruth 1:1-18

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Irene Pak Lee

October 31, 2021

## **Traveling the Path of Love**

Many of you know that I am a child of two wonderful people who immigrated to the United States from Korea in the mid-70s. In fact, throughout the years, several of you have met them, and if you haven't, and you're here in worship today, today is your opportunity because they're here in worship. I want to preface this story I'm about to share by telling you all that they know I'm going to talk about them, so you don't have to worry on their behalf. They know this is part of what you get when you have a daughter who is a pastor and tells stories.

Ever since I was a kid, I've always loved hearing a good love story. And to be honest, when I finally got around to asking my parents about theirs, I thought their story was SO romantic. They had been friends for 8 years before they started dating and then when my dad's family decided to immigrate to the United States all together, they wrote each other love letters. My dad was the youngest of 4 kids and culturally he had to wait until his older brothers were married first, so he waited to propose to my mom. And finally the day came. He proposed, she said yes, and he flew back to Korea and married her. Then they came to the U.S. to begin their new life together.

As I got older and wanted to understand more fully how in particular, my mom made a huge decision like that...you know, to leave her entire family who loved her and didn't want her to leave, all of her friends, her homeland, familiar food, language, and immigrate to a country not knowing anyone but her spouse and his family with no guarantees, I remember asking her how she made that choice. Her answer? She prayed about it. WELL, faith and romance combined for this teenager who was super into churchy things and romance, this answer was all I needed.

They've been married and living in the U.S. for over 40 years now, and it wasn't until a few years ago, maybe shortly after getting married myself, that this response and decision of my mom and my dad to do this thing in a new country where they were still learning the language and the culture and navigating all of this without a network of support that I fully recognized that their romantic story was probably a really really HARD one. Because if you've been in any kind of relationship for any amount of time, you know that relationships are hard. I love my spouse, but marriage is hard. And so to do this in a new country, not knowing the language well, not having family or friends around you, not understanding all the cultural differences or quirks, would only add extra strain to any relationship, even as it could bring you together.

So the other day, I asked my mom again...how did you know? Because telling me that she prayed about it and made that decision sounds absolutely bonkers to me now.

And so, having this conversation again as two adults, I thought I was going to hear a different response. Some deep analysis, a pros and cons list, or maybe some glorious moment where the clouds opened up from the heavens and she heard a booming voice from God telling her to go.

And so I asked again, "How did you know, Umma?"

And you know what she told me?

"I prayed about it." I prayed about it.

And before I could sit back and throw my hands up in confusion, she continued and said, "I took time and prayed to God for 30 days and I prayed, "God, give me power, give me love, and I will follow you." And throughout those 30 days of prayer, she felt herself strengthened for whatever would come. Yes, she loved my dad and she also knew nothing was certain by choosing to marry him and move to a foreign land, but through prayer and love for God and for my Appa, she knew that with God as her anchor, she could face whatever lied ahead, even though she knew nothing about that path.

In the gospel reading that Fred read for us today, at the end of the reading, the disciples are stunned into silence by hearing the statement that the greatest commandment is to love God with all heart, soul, mind and strength and then to love your neighbor as yourself. And when I heard about my Umma's prayer over those 30 days and hearing the conviction in her voice even now as she told me the story "God give me power, give me love, and I will follow you..." The kind of faith she expressed where you drop all certainty to go to travel the path of love, well, I felt a bit stunned into silence as well.

Friends, when was the last time you were awed into silence from a command to love? From a statement of faith and conviction in our Almighty God? I'll admit, it's been a while for me.

What this tells me is that the call to love almost feels trite or is made to be simplified in some sense these days. If I stand here and tell you to love God and love your neighbor, it is highly unlikely that someone is going to write me an e-mail tomorrow telling me that I'm preaching blasphemy. But maybe if you knew how hard that would be, what the full cost of loving God and loving your neighbor could be, how sacrificial it would be a times, then maybe I would get that e-mail outraged that I would dare proclaim such a thing.

Because the truth is, love is hard. Really loving another person fully let alone God, is really hard. Traveling the path of love is hard.

And so in this beginning story of the book of Ruth, we hear the hard. It's not long before the story that begins with a focus on a man named Elimelech and his two sons shifts to his widow Naomi, who loses her husband first, and then her two sons. She is left with two daughters-in-law who are Moabites, foreigners. Naomi decides to head back to Judah, to her own homeland, and tells the two women to go home so that they have a *chance* to live a fuller life in a society where there is no safety net for widows. Her solution is practical for all of them. The love between all of them is already palpable as they all began on the journey together. It's along the way that Naomi realizes that Ruth and Orpah have a better chance at life without her. And so she sends them back with a blessing and they all weep. Orpah receives the blessing and goes. And Ruth? Though they both travel a road yet unknown to them, Ruth instead chooses to travel an unknown road of love. Of jagged love. And this vow she makes to Naomi is famously used at modern weddings: 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...if even death parts me from you.

It is a beautiful and bold vow but I do think it is interesting that it is used in weddings because aside from the fact that it is a vow from one woman to another woman, a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law, the context of her declaration is not one of romantic affective love. The context of this is not one of happy hopeful cloud nine love. Instead, in context, Ruth is making this promise to a woman who is grieving, sad, embittered and widowed. To someone who is probably not actually easy to love. A few verses later, Naomi will change her name to Mara-from the Hebrew meaning of "pleasant" to "bitter" and tells her people that God has brought about disaster on her life. Her grief, her loss of faith, her loss of self is named...and it is to this woman that Ruth promises to abide with.

Theologian Debie Thomas analyzes this and writes, "Ruth's vow, then, is a vow of tenacity, fortitude, and sacrificial loyalty as much as it is a vow of affinity, affection, or "love" as our culture might describe it. It is the vow of one grief-stricken, traumatized, and profoundly vulnerable woman to another. Ruth recognizes that Naomi is far too broken to offer her much reassurance or comfort. She knows that leaving Moab with her mother-in-law and traveling to Judah will render *her* an unwelcome foreigner in a culture that has a history of expelling foreign women as dangerous. She knows that money will be scarce, her prospects for remarriage uncertain, and any future reunion with her birth family unlikely. She knows that sticking with Naomi will require a reordering of her life. And yet she puts her legitimate worries, losses, and fears aside, and vows to love Naomi as herself."

I wish I could ask her, “How did you know to go, Ruth?”

“How did you know to go, Mom?”

Their choices could stun us into silence, but may it not for long, my friends.

Because biblical love as seen here is not just an emotion we feel, but it’s a path we travel.

And I am guessing that if each one of us took a minute to reflect on our own lives in relationship to those we love, those who love us, and our experience of God’s faithfulness, the kind of love as demonstrated by Ruth to Naomi, divine love, has also been made known to us through the brave choices and actions of people who have committed to loving us as they love God, themselves and as they love their neighbor. I am guessing it has been revealed to us most clearly not on the paths of love when we are skipping down it with our head in the clouds, but when someone has walked on that path with us when it became hilly, thorny, unknown and hard.

Friends, how many times have you been loved when you were bitter, grieving and in despair? When has someone loved you in the midst of their own vulnerability?

And today as we contemplate our call to love and be witnesses to love as recognized through the great cloud of saints that surround us, through the call to be reformed and always reforming, and in thinking seriously about how we will steward our time, talents, and resources, again, Thomas writes and asks, “How often have you pledged your fidelity to the vulnerable, the lost, the defeated, the hopeless – and discovered that God meets you in that pledge? When have you embarked down a loving path, not because of what you felt, but because you responded in obedience to the first and greatest commandment?”

Traveling the path of love is a lot of unknowns, and it does not always come with a guarantee. But in the story of Ruth and Naomi, we know that a story that begins with tragedy ends with promise and hope and a lineage that will reach to a man named Jesus of Nazareth. And we know in the story of my mom and my dad, that begins with leaving behind everything familiar to everything unknown, that it continues to them sitting here, watching their daughter preach a sermon, and getting to play with some super cute grandkids.

Friends, however our path goes, today may we commit to traveling the difficult path of love with someone. Enjoy it when it’s fun and sunny and bright, and dare to walk it when it’s scary, hopeless, and despairing. And along the way, may we all have the courage to pray, “God, give me power, give me love, and I will follow you.”

May we all pray that prayer this day-and may God find us faithful as we travel the wild, messy, unknown and beautiful path of love. May it be so.

Amen.