

Faith Unmasked, October 31, 2021
Halloween
Ruth 1:1-18

Prayer: O God, whose generosity and lovingkindness is without end, we enter your presence, as flawed and limited people. While we seek to be in service and to live generously, we are aware that we mask our feelings and our ability to do and be more. Renew and strengthen us to love like Christ loves and to give ourselves meaningfully and purposefully...

I'll begin with a public service announcement: October is breast cancer awareness month, and I'd like to personally urge all women who are eligible for cancer screening not to delay it or put it off. Get it on your calendar. I spent all of 2013 in treatment for breast cancer after a routine mammogram caught mine. My kids were 14, 12 and 9 at the time. The news was a total shock. I had no symptoms or family history. I am fortunate they caught it when they did. My cancer was aggressive. I am pleased to say that clinically, today I am considered "cured;" my Dr told me at the end of my treatment: "well, you're going to die...but not from this."

The support services at Smilow at Yale-New Haven Hospital were great; among many things, they recommended I take a workshop they offered called "look good, feel better" which teaches you how to do hair and make up to resemble your usual look, after you've lost all your hair to chemotherapy. I felt good most days, and if you walk around bald, most people want to discuss that and nothing else, so I appreciated being able to masquerade as myself, and go to work, preach, attend meetings, visit people, and not draw attention to myself more than necessary. Looking like an approximation of myself.

But my main goal was not to scare my kids' friends. They were young. The kids' were in on this. I didn't wear the wig at home when we were alone, it was scratchy and my skin was sensitive. When a friend would come to the door, I would hear, "I'll get the door Mom, can you put on your wig?" But that year on Halloween, I wanted to take off my wig, wash the makeup off my face where I had drawn on my eyebrows, and used shadow to give the illusion of eyelashes. I wanted to answer the door to the crowds of trick or treaters that maraud through our neighborhood, bald headed, with no eyebrows or eyelashes. I wanted to appear as I was.

Well, I was overruled. My 9 year old said, "oh no, mommy, that would be too scary..." so, I wore a scarf... as I recall. Don't scare the children, even on Halloween...

The way that we show up in our lives needs to be commensurate with people's ability to receive us, recognize us, and engage with us. Cancer treatment taught me to wear a mask for the purposes of maintaining the continuity of my own life. My work, my family. What is so hard about chemotherapy and long ongoing treatment in many cases is that it erodes identity. I'd like to lift up for your consideration, the way that we reveal our identities and how we mask them.

Ruth is a story about changed identity, and what is revealed as events unfold. It's unmasking. In her case, a woman of fine character, who is remembered for how she negotiated in difficult circumstances, not uncommon to many in her day. The first verses of the book of Ruth set the stage for this story of faith. Ruth is only 4 chapters long, one of the shortest books, but one of the longest sustained narratives.

The previous book is Judges, which deals with the historical period after Joshua's death and before the establishment of Kings in Israel. It is mostly an account of wars; scholars identify a pattern of the people disregarding the guidance of the judges, sinning, being punished, appealing to God, and being rescued, resulting in a season of peace, until it starts all over again. Famines and wars; inspired leadership, but wayward people. The book of Judges is building a case that the people need a King.

By contrast, there are no villains in the book of Ruth, no one to blame for the current circumstances, just an account of how individuals made their own choices, given the politics and the challenges in their moment in history -- which were very hard on many people. Here we get a small slice of how it affected one family.

Ruth herself is the heroine of this book, but she is also an important figure in the whole Bible. She is King David's great grandmother. She and Boaz have a son Obed, who has a son Jesse, whose youngest son you may remember, is a ruddy cheeked shepherd, given to playing his harp in the fields as he watches his

father's flocks; at once unsuited and perfectly prepared to be name King David one day.

Ruth is named in the first chapter of the gospel of Matthew, which offers a genealogy of Jesus. But I am getting ahead of my story.

We read this morning that Ruth and her sister in Law are both Moabite wives to Naomi's sons. Naomi's two sons and her husband have all died, and Naomi is returning to her people in Bethlehem. She's been away so long, they may remember her, but there is no real place for her there. No homestead, no farm, no family. She'll be gleaning with the poor people in that area, according to the law that allows for the marginalized to be fed literally from the margins -- of the fields. It's all she can imagine now.

She tells her daughters in law to likewise go on back to their own people. And you see this family, who clearly love each other, deciding that the most loving thing now is to part ways. Orpah and Ruth are both Moabite women. There's a law against Jews marrying Moabites, but there are laws because it happens all the time, and these aren't constructs, they are people who loved each other.

One of the big points of this book is that Ruth, who is a Moabite, is the great grandmother of King David. I'd like to unmask this for you. In the end, it isn't your ethnicity that is important, it's not our bloodlines, what is important is your character, or to use the Bible's words: acts of kindness. This mixed heritage is the strength of the story. Ruth was a Moabite yet what Boaz later recognizes in her is her commitment to Naomi which finds her gleaning in his field, her character, her love which gets expressed by acts of service and kindness. That is what you build a kingdom on: love.

Orpah kisses her mother in law and leaves to return to her people, but Ruth will not: "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God..."

Ruth is taking on her mother in law's family identity. These verses are often read at weddings, but you notice this is not a romantic relationship. Ruth has found her family, and she is home with Naomi, wherever that takes them.

In the New Testament Paul encourages the members of the early churches to understand one another as family to each other. Unmasked, the Christians have more shared values, goals, hopes in common with each other than with their biological families who are busy making sacrifices to idols. The Christians are family to one another in ways their own families can never be.

Recently I heard another preacher say that this is a check that the modern church has yet to cash. South Church, one of the things I am learning about you is your commitment to raise children together, to show up in the community with acts of kindness, to invite each other into the renewing Spirit of the living God. I wonder how much you know about this.

The geo-politics of our age, like the time of the judges, is difficult on many levels and in many families. I suspect that some of you are wearing masks for good reasons, because when you love a community this much, you need to calibrate your love to what the community will receive. I understand the need to wear a mask on some days, I also understand that the community needs to know of your love, your faith. Tell it, show it, so they'll understand.

There's a good story here, unmask it.

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The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury