

## Partnership Ruth 1:6-22

Prepare a worship and reflection space with a picture such as the one below or a sculpture or object that provides a visual reminder of people in mutual, loving relationship and partnership.

**Three things to know as you read today's episode (spoiler alert! the final bullet point gives away the ending of the book):**

- The ancient storyteller uses a series of clever word-plays that are clear in Hebrew, but impossible to catch in an English translation. This is especially true of the names. The translation below gives a parenthetical English translation of some of the Hebrew names the first time they appear, to give you a sense of the storyteller's brilliant narrative technique.
- There are three "god words" in this story: *'elohim*, *Yahweh*, and *Shadday*. *'Elohim* is the plural form of the word *'el*. We usually translate the plural as "god" or "gods," depending on the context. In this story, the use of this word is focused in the turning-point exchange between Naomi and Ruth in vv 15-16. Naomi urges Ruth to follow her sister-in-law Orpah who is going back to "her people and her gods." Ruth refuses, pledging to stay with Naomi: "your people are my people and your god(s), my god(s)." The translation below follows the traditional pattern and translates the first *'elohim* as plural (Orpah has returned to "her gods") and the second *'elohim* as singular ("your God, my God") though the form in Hebrew is plural here as well. A case could be made for translating *'elohim* in these two verses consistently as "gods." So, Ruth is not prejudging the matter: if you worship only one god, that's fine; but one or many, your gods -- or god or whatever -- will be mine as well! The other two "god words" in the story are *Yahweh* and *Shadday*. *Yahweh* is usually translated "the LORD," with LORD in small caps. It's the normal proper name for God in the Hebrew Bible. *Shadday* means "mountain." It's probably best to think of *Shadday* in this story as a title for *Yahweh*. So when Naomi talks about *Yahweh* and *Shadday*, she's probably talking about the same deity: *Yahweh* -- you know, "the Mountain."



Rev. Eliko Bonanga, President of the Disciples of Christ Community in Congo (right) greets Disciple leader.

- **Spoiler alert! Don't read this bullet if you don't already know how things turn out or if you aren't just an impatient reader who's not above jumping to the last page.**

Today's scripture is the first episode in a story that ends with Ruth marrying a wealthy relative of her dead husband, thanks in part to Naomi's very clever behind-the-scenes work to get her widowed daughter-in-law noticed. Naomi's savvy and Ruth's assertiveness result not only in the economic security of these two otherwise vulnerable women but in the birth of a boy who will be the grandfather of the great king David.

### **Begin with this prayer or a prayer of your own choosing:**

*Gracious God,  
open our hearts and minds  
to hear a fresh word  
in these ancient words  
of Scripture.  
Keep us mindful of our sisters and brothers  
in Congo and in the United States and Canada.  
Give us the courage,  
boldness,  
and deep commitment  
of Naomi and Ruth  
as we seek your will for us this day.  
Amen.*

### **Read the translation of Ruth I below or read from a version of your choice**

#### **Ruth 1:1-5 -- Preliminaries**

It so happened that during the time when the judges judged, there was a famine in the land. A man from Bethlehem ("house of bread") Judah went to be a migrant worker in the fields of Moab -- he, his wife, and his two sons. The man's name was Elimelek ("my God is king") and his wife's name was Naomi ("my delight, my pleasant one"). His two sons' names were Mahlon ("sickly") and Kilyon ("finished"). They were Ephraimites from Bethlehem, Judah. So they went to the fields of Moab, and that's where they were.

Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died. She and her two sons remained.

They got themselves Moabite wives. The first one's name was Orpah ("back of the neck"). The second one's name was Ruth ("companion, friend"). They had lived there about ten years when the two of them, Mahlon and Kilyon, died too. The woman was left alone without her two sons or her husband.

#### **Ruth 1:6-22 -- Presence**

So she and her two daughters-in-law started to return from the fields of Moab because she heard, while still in the fields of Moab, that Yahweh had paid attention to his people, giving them bread. So she left the place where she was, along with her two daughters-in-law, and they set out together on the road that returns to the country of Judah.

Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “You two go back, each woman to the house of her mother. May Yahweh keep faith with your people like you have done with the dead and with me. May Yahweh grant that you find a resting place, each woman, in the house of her husband!” And she kissed them. And they all lifted their voice and cried.

And they said to her, “We’ll go to your people with you!”

But Naomi said, “Go back, my daughters! Why should you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that you can have as husbands? Go back, my daughters! Go because I’m too old for a man to even have me! Even if I thought there were hope for me, even if were with a man tonight and I gave birth to sons, should you two wait till they grow up? Would you two shut yourselves up so a man wouldn’t have you? No, my daughters! It’s much more bitter (*mar*) for me than for you two, because the power of Yahweh has gone out against me!”

And they all lifted their voices again and cried.

So Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.

And she said, “Look, your sister-in-law is returning to her people and her gods. You return too! Follow your sister-in-law!”

***But Ruth said, “Don’t ask me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Because where you go, I will go! Where you settle down for the night, I will settle down! Your people are my people, and your god, my god! Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried! May Yahweh do thus and even more so to me, if even death comes between me and you!”***

When she saw that she was absolutely determined to go with her, she quit trying to convince her.

So the two of them walked until they came to Bethlehem.

Now, when they came to Bethlehem, the whole city was in an uproar over them. They said, “Is this Naomi?”

But she said to them, “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me ‘Mara.’ Because Shadday has made me very bitter! I left full, but Yahweh brought me back empty. Why should you call me Naomi when Yahweh has accused me and Shadday has brought me disaster?”

So Naomi returned, with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law who returned with her from the fields of Moab. And they arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.



Global Ministries Africa executive Sandra Gourdet with Congolese mother and child in Bolenge, where Sandra herself once lived with her family as mission staff. She taught for several years in Bolenge.

### **Discuss the following questions**

We're not told why the two Moabite daughters-in-law want to leave Moab with the mother of their deceased husbands. The narrator leaves us to speculate on their motives. So let's speculate. What are some reasons they might have wanted to stay with Naomi?

How did the death of Elimelek, Mahlon, and Kilyon affect the economic standing of the women?

Why would the ancient audience of the story think it was important for Orpah and Ruth to find husbands to replace the ones who died?

Are there reasons, other than the normal feelings of personal attachment and love, which the death of Naomi's husband and sons might make her feel like God had turned against her?

What word or phrase would you use to describe Naomi? Ruth? Explain.

Do you think it would have been safe for women to travel a great distance (Moab to Bethlehem) alone?

Can you think of someone you've known who, though in a vulnerable situation, simply refused to give up? What kept him or her going? How, if at all, is that person like or unlike Naomi and Ruth? How, if at all, did relationships with other people help?

What do you make of the characters' names?

It's possible to read this story as a "morality play" like Milton's *Pilgrim's Progress*. What might the "moral" or multiple "morals" of this story be?

Take another look at the highlighted speech of Ruth in vv. 16-17 above. Look at the order of the things she says she will do. Where does God fit into the list? Which comes first: commitment to God or love for a human being? What is the focus of Ruth's commitment? What, if anything, do you make of this ordering?

Do you think Ruth has her priorities right? Why or why not?

In Matthew 25, at the Great Judgment at the end of history, the Judge (God) says, "when you did it to the least of these, my little ones, you did it to me." How, if at all, does Jesus's vision of what God thinks is really important, help us think about Ruth's priorities in her speech here?

What, if anything, do Ruth's priorities have to say about what our priorities should be?

### **Unbreakable bonds of partnership and love**

This remarkable book is one of the rare narratives in the Hebrew Bible that feature women as central characters. In fact, were it not for this book, we would have no real-world examples of some of the feminine plural verbal forms and pronouns in ancient Hebrew. In Ruth, we don't just find a strong woman, we find more than one of them!

There are several striking things about the book -- for example, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to "the households of your mothers," not the expected "households of your fathers." We get a rare glimpse at the interior life of women. We see women binding together and figuring out a way to survive and thrive within the social-economic and cultural constraints they faced as women in the ancient world. The fates and actions of men are important in the narrative, but the deliberate decisions

and actions of the women move the story to its surprise happy ending. Men make major decisions and do important things -- Elimelek moves his family and then he and his sons promptly die (chapter 1), Boaz decides to protect Ruth (chapter 2), reacts with decisive calm to her startling mid-night gesture (chapter 3), and makes a risky public play to perform the duty of levirate marriage with this childless widow of a near kinsman (chapter 4)-- but it's the careful planning of Naomi and the bold assertiveness of Ruth (chapter 3) that set things on the proper course. In the final analysis, when the interests of these economically vulnerable women are met -- largely through their own cleverness and courage -- the whole nation benefits. We discover at the end, that the child Ruth bears from her marriage to Boaz will become the grandfather of the great king David. It is fitting that the women of Bethlehem name the child and give the last

speech of the book: "your daughter-in-law who loves you has given birth. She is better for you than seven sons!" (4:15). In this story, women work within and around the constraints of patriarchal culture to direct their own narrative destiny and in so doing, bless the nation. The story starts with the ironic note that there is a famine in "the house of bread" (Bethlehem). A man Elimelek ("my God is king" -- so is this story going to have something to do with kings?) decides to cross the border into the currently more prosperous Moab where he and his family can find agricultural work. We're told that these people are Ephraimites (i.e., from the North) who are living in Judah (i.e., the South). So this family embodies the fullness of the people of Israel, North and South. He gets to Moab and dies, as do his unfortunately but presciently named sons, "Sickly" and "Finished." The sons have married Moabite wives, but they've not been married long enough to produce any children. Elimelek's widow Naomi ("My delight! My pleasant one!" -- though she doesn't stay that way long) decides to go back to Bethlehem. Remember, women typically married as soon as possible after they reached puberty. Depending on how you read v 4, the two Moabite widows are probably in their early 20s and maybe still in their teens when they are widowed. Naomi is probably around 40. As women unattached to a male-headed household, they are vulnerable. Ruth faces the brutal social-economic truth for these women and urges her daughters-in-law to go back to their birth families and hope they can arrange another marriage. The younger women resist, but one finally agrees to leave. Fortunately for us as readers of the story, Ruth refuses. The key to success in this story is the powerful bond between Naomi and Ruth. Ruth lives up to her name ("Friend, companion"), refusing to do the culturally expected thing in tragic circumstances such as these. Over her mother-in-law's objection, she insists that she will stay with Naomi. The narrative -- whether by design or not, I don't know -- underlines the depth of their personal bond by the very words Ruth uses as she argues with Naomi about whether she should go to Judah with Naomi or stay in Moab and find another husband. In vv. 14 and 16, there are two key verbs that also appear at the end of Genesis 2. In the garden of Eden, the woman (*ishshah*) is formed from the side of the human (*ha'adam*), who now for the first time in the story is called a "man" (*ish*). The man -- or perhaps the narrator -- then says this: "therefore, a man will **leave** (the



Sharon Watkins, Disciples General Minister and President speaks with children at Bolenge. Sharon lived and worked in Congo for two years on the staff of the united church of which the Disciples of Christ community in Congo is a member. She helped develop an adult literacy program.

root verb is *'azav*) his father and his mother and **cling to** (*davak*) his woman and they will become one flesh." In v 14 of today's episode, we're told that Ruth **clung to** Naomi (*davkah*, the feminine of *davak*), and in v 16 she pleads with Naomi: "don't ask me to **leave** you (the root is *'azav*)." The intertextual resonance of the verbal pair -- "cling to" and "leave" -- underlines the intensity of Ruth's relationship with her mother-in-law. It is as deep and powerful and permanent as marriage is supposed to be. Ruth then raises the stakes by invoking Yahweh's name in an oath. Ironically, Ruth calls on Naomi's God to witness and guarantee her promise that she will put her trust and give her loyalty to Naomi's God! The oath is its own self-fulfillment. As the Sinai commandment makes clear, when you invoke Yahweh in an oath, you'd better keep your promise (Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10)! Don't take Yahweh's name in vain! Such an oath was taken so seriously that Hebrew speakers normally refused to spell out the consequences for not doing what they were promising to do -- such things are better left unsaid. "As Yahweh lives, if I don't do x ..." is the way they normally took an oath. Because translators don't like to fill in blank spaces with "...", we usually translate the incomplete sentence like this: "As Yahweh lives, I certainly will do x!" But the Hebrew makes clear that the consequences of swearing by Yahweh and not following through are just too horrifying to say out loud. Ruth substitutes "thus" for the "...." in "May Yahweh do 'thus' and even more to me," Ruth says, "if even death separates me from you!" Ruth invokes Yahweh to swear her allegiance to Naomi to the point of death -- and even beyond! By swearing the oath, Ruth ends the discussion. Naomi quits trying to convince her.

In Jewish tradition, Ruth is celebrated as the ideal convert. What's interesting is that her "conversion" is not presented as primarily a theological matter. She's not switching loyalty to the Judean God Yahweh because she has changed her mind about the gods of her own Moabite people or about Yahweh. She's not thought about it and decided to give up her gods and become a monotheist. She shifts her loyalty to Yahweh and to the people of Judah because she is completely loyal to Naomi. She does what she does because of her relationship with a living, breathing human being, her mother-in-law. Her decision to stay in relationship with Naomi was primary. The theological end result flowed from that prior human connection. She trusts Yahweh because she loves Naomi and wants to stay with her.

The movement from human relationship to theological conviction that we see in Ruth's oath of allegiance to Naomi raises an important question for our own theological reflection as Christians called to tell the good news, to share the gospel. Is it possible that the Christ who is revealed in our acts of compassion, in our freely-given, nothing-expected-in-return, hands-on response to human suffering, in our desire to reach out and connect with others just because they're human and we're human and we're all in this together -- is it possible that our actions really do speak louder than our words. Is it possible that the Christ who cares more for the welfare of the human being than the precise nature of their religious belief (Matthew 25) works through us in our daily acts of presence and partnership? Is it possible that our actions of love and commitment are even more important than the theological arguments we muster? Theological conviction is important, but is deep human connection prior, more basic? What does this mean for us as we seek to share the good news? What does it mean for our understanding of "mission"?

## **Mission as presence**

Global Ministries has adopted the following mission statement: To receive and share the Good News of Jesus Christ by joining with global and local partners to work for justice, reconciliation and peace.

These core values guide the mission:

- **Presence** - manifesting God's love by living in intentional, committed relationships
- **Mutuality** - walking in hope with others in God's mission
- **Community** - building interdependence and unity among all of God's children
- **Justice** - living out God's radical love by confronting powers that deny the fullness of life and the integrity of creation
- **Peace** - embodying reconciling relationships with God, humanity and creation

In what ways, if at all, do the values expressed in this mission statement reflect the values we see in today's episode from Ruth?

## Mission as presence and partnership in Congo

Disciples missionaries began to work in Congo at Bolenge in 1899. From the beginning of their work, the missionaries sought to develop an autonomous Congolese church that would be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.<sup>1</sup>

To assist the Congolese in the early stages, missionaries and their families shared with their Congolese Christian brothers and sisters the rigors and dangers of life in the equatorial rain-forest, frequently in the midst of political turmoil and violence. Some died as a result. Presence included risk and even danger.

Now more than a hundred years later, the Disciples of Christ community in Congo has numerically surpassed Disciples in the US and Canada to become the largest community of Disciples in the world.

Today, the people of Congo suffer the repercussions of more than a decade of war on their soil. Yet the

Disciples community there continues the work of education, agricultural development, and health care -- commitments that have grown from that early partnership and continued presence through the years. Today, for example, more than 16,000 patients are treated each year by the all-Congolese medical staff at the Bolenge hospital. Countless numbers of children are educated in the school there. This thriving and hopeful Christian witness in very difficult, discouraging circumstances has its roots in the decisions and commitments of courageous and visionary Christians from North America and from Congo to be present with one another, to walk and work and live together as family, to learn from each other and share the fruits of the gospel with each other. Clinging to each other, refusing to leave. In that deep commitment, we are one people, loyal to the one God of us all.



School children at a ceremony celebrating the laying of the cornerstone for a new wing of the Bolenge hospital.

<sup>1</sup> from Bosela E. Eale, "The Restoration (Stone-Campbell) Movement in Africa: Its Beginning and Development" <http://globalministries.org/resources/mission-study/college-of-mission/the-restoration-movement.html>

**Close with the following prayer or with a prayer of your own choosing:**

*God of unyielding presence,  
When Israel escaped slavery  
and wandered in the wilderness,  
you did not leave them,  
even as you do not leave us.  
When they lived as migrant workers  
in the fields of Moab,  
you did not leave them,  
even as you do not leave us.  
When vulnerable women,  
cut off from their source of economic support  
clung to each other,  
you clung to them,  
even as you cling to us.  
You cling to us.  
You do not leave us.  
Even to the point of death  
on a cross,  
and even beyond death,  
you cling to us,  
you do not leave us.  
Help us cling to each other.  
By the power of your  
life-giving,  
resurrecting,  
ever-present Spirit,  
bind us to each other  
in presence and partnership.  
In the US, in Canada, in Congo,  
bind us together  
like Ruth and Naomi,  
by the power  
and presence  
of the Risen Christ,  
who clings to us  
and never, ever leaves us alone.  
Amen.*

**For the complete bible study series please visit  
[www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html](http://www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html).**