

# Greenfield Hill Congregational Church

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Date: February 16, 2014  
Sermon Title: The Truth is Ruth is Love  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Ruth 1:3-17

## Ruth 1:3-17

*But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.*

*Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.' Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.' Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

*So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, '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.  
Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.  
May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!*

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I used a lot of clichés in our opening prayer, didn't I? Clichés are just sayings that we keep saying because we experience them to be true, so we pass them along person to person, generation to generation.

"Love makes the world go round." "All you need is love." And the ultimate Christian cliché, "God is love," a cliché that gets tossed around all the time, but a cliché that holds within itself all the truth of the Bible. The Bible is this ancient document that follows God's own evolution from Creator to lover, from Pygmalion to lover, from Judge and King and Lord to lover. That's why we began today with that "Love Hymn" medley that expresses both our love, "My Jesus, I Love Thee," but also Jesus's love for us, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul."

As a pastor, I get to live within the Bible all year long. On Monday nights with our Confirmation Class, we take them from the beginning to the end. And our new Bible Study this year, on "Biblical Literacy" has us doing the same thing. So we have a front-row seat for this "Evolution of God."

In the beginning we see God as angry, demanding, bossy, punishing. Adam and Eve eat the apple. BOOM, they're cursed and tossed out of Paradise! God gets angry at the world and wipes it out with a flood; God gets angry at Sodom and Gomorrah and wipes them out with fire and brimstone; God gets angry at people for building the Tower of Babel and destroys the project; God gets angry at the Egyptians and plagues their whole nation with frogs, boils, and death. That's the first thousand years. Then jump ahead a thousand years, a little baby is born in Bethlehem. Why? Because "God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." Why? Because ... "God is love."

You know, as a pastor I am immersed in love. People want it. People want to know what it is. People want to know what it isn't. People want to know how to fix it, how to find it, how to improve it, how to save it. Fact is, much of

pastoral ministry is helping people find it, know it, keep it, even define it. And I'm not just talking about romantic love. We love all sorts of people and things and activities that capture us, enthrall us, wrap us around their little fingers.

I woke up on Valentine's Day to discover a practically life-sized photo of Derek Jeter covering the refrigerator. Alida's passion! Love extends in lots of directions.

I'll bet a lot of you have been following the Olympics. For me, half the fun is learning the back stories to those amazing athletes. The things they do astound me when I watch world-class hockey players do what they do, skating backward as fast as they go forward, stopping on a dime, pinpoint passes, grace and fury mixed together. I watched that little 15-year-old Russian figure skater do spins that defied the imagination, yet she imagined them and did them. Then I watched the snowboarders fly into the air, twisting and turning, defying gravity. If it weren't for slow-motion replays, I wouldn't believe that I saw what I just saw. How on earth does anyone become that good at anything? Seriously. How on earth does anyone become that good at anything?

Well, when you read the back stories to these Olympians, sooner or later it comes down to "passion." Yes, ability. Yes, practice. Yes, DNA. Yes, coaching. But at some point you have to love it, you have to be crazy about it. You have to have passion. That's what gets you over all the humps of life, all the obstacles and disappointments, all the failures. When there's something you can't get out of your blood, out of your system, you're hooked; you're "in love."

I remember meeting with a couple to prepare them for marriage, and in the course of conversation, the man said, "I need my daily fix of Katherine." I *need my daily fix of Katherine*. For him, no day was complete without some real personal, genuine contact with the person he loved. That can come in a hundred ways. In person, by phone, or Skype on a business trip. With a touch, an embrace, or a card.

On Wednesday, Alida came home from Stop & Shop and told me an interesting little fact. She had been in the card section buying me a Valentine's card and noticed most of the cards for husbands and boyfriends were gone. Most of the cards for women — wives and girlfriends — were still there. Was that a hint, or what? Now this was on Wednesday, two days to go. But not to be outdone, I immediately went to the back room and triumphantly, proudly, lovingly emerged carrying *The Valentine Gift*. I passed my "love test" for another year. So what do you love? Or whom?

Back to the Olympics for a minute. *The New York Times* last week carried two articles about American ice hockey. One was about little Connecticut. We have six men and women on the Olympic teams, and five grew up playing for the Mid-Fairfield Youth Hockey in Stamford. How do you get that success? "Passion," the owner said, "passion, excellence, and knowledge."

The other article was about a tiny town, Warroad, Minnesota, population 1,781, that has produced seven Olympic medal winners and has two more going for gold this week. Including the guy who scored four times yesterday. How? Frankly, the town is crazy about hockey. "Everything is scheduled around hockey," the town historian said. "Wednesdays are supposed to be church night, but you wouldn't know it during hockey season ... local pride and passion are everywhere." (Longman, Jeré. "Population 1,781. Medals 7." *New York Times* 5 Feb. 2014: B12. Print.) There it is again. Love expressed through "passion."

At our Sports Worship a few weeks ago, we honored two all-star soccer players, Katie Brennan and Krissy Bradley. I said to them, once upon a time they were little girls, 5, 6 years old, when their parents signed them up for youth soccer. Now they're high school seniors, all-stars, much honored, off to excellent colleges. How did that happen? "Passion," they said, "you have to be passionate about what you do if you want to be your best."

I read an obituary recently. John Dobson, 1915-2014. Dobson loved the stars, outer space, astronomy. That was his passion. As a young man, he had a varied career, everything from chemistry to the defense industry to becoming a Hindu priest. While living in a Hindu monastery in Berkeley, California, he started building simple telescopes with which to pursue his love of the universe. Using recycled glass, cardboard tubes, and a plywood mount, Dobson began taking his love of the universe literally to the streets, to people, to schools and classrooms. "He set up telescopes on the sidewalks of San Francisco and reeled in passersby like a carnival barker ... when friends urged him to patent his [telescope] design, he refused. He said, "These are gifts to humanity." (Martin, Douglas. "John Dobson Dies a 98: Taught Art of Stargazing." *New York Times* 22 Jan. 2014: B17. Print). That's passion. That's love. That's cool. Which brings us to our Bible story today, the story of Ruth, a perfect love story: short, simple, sweet.

It takes place 3,000 years ago in the "little Town of Bethlehem." A famine drives a family out of Israel. They end up in a foreign country, an enemy country, Moab. Their two sons end up marrying local girls — foreigners, non-Jews, non-Israelites. A shocking thing at the time, forbidden, shameful. But hard times create hard choices. Over time, the father dies. Later, the two

sons die. So we're left with a grief-stricken widow and two grief-stricken daughters-in-law.

After a while, Naomi, the mother-in-law, decides to return to Israel and releases her daughters-in-law from any obligation to her. She begs them to stay behind in their own country with their own people, their own comfort zone, get remarried, have kids, live a happy and full life. One of them, Ruth, refuses, saying, "Whither thou goest, I will go. Wherever thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people. And thy God shall be my God." This girl, Ruth, a young widow, a Moabite, a gentile, a pagan of some sort, promises to stay with her mother-in-law, no matter what.

Whenever I do a wedding and it's almost over, just before they kiss, I give them a final blessing, and that's the blessing I give. I say to the wedding couple exactly this, "May you have the kind of love Ruth had for her beloved, and may I remind you, her beloved was her mother-in-law, "for Ruth said to her beloved, 'Wherever you go, I will go, wherever you live, I will live. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God shall be my God.'" Then they kiss. Of course, people love the "mother-in law" reference. Even the pope, in his Valentine's Day message, poked fun at the eternal conflict with mothers-in-law.

But Ruth and Naomi had a love greater than prejudice, tradition, fear, ignorance, jokes, insults, or caricatures. And that just led to more love. When Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, they set about creating a new life. The Book of Ruth is a short one. You'll love reading it yourself. I don't want to ruin it for you, but let's just say they set out to find Ruth a husband! Not as easy as it sounds.

The ancient world was not an easy place for a single woman, a widow, a foreigner, and Ruth was all three. Naomi still had some relatives in Bethlehem, and I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that Naomi dangled Ruth out there to see what she might catch! What follows is a lot of ancient tradition, family responsibilities, honor codes, with most everybody trying to do the right thing.

Ruth does catch the eye of Boaz, a distant relative of her deceased husband. He sees her harvesting in his fields. He's "smitten," as we used to say. He protects her, welcomes her, courts her, and he does it all with integrity, as a gentleman. And "they lived happily ever after!" Got married, had kids, prospered. Indeed, their first child becomes the grandfather of King David. And since Jesus, from Bethlehem, is a direct descendent of David, that makes Ruth Jesus's great, great, 20 times great-grandmother.

So the "God who IS Love," best represented by Jesus, God's gift of love, is a direct descendent of Ruth, whose only claim to fame is that she loved wholeheartedly and was loved in return. It is such a wonderfully straight line from love to love, going forward from Ruth's love to "God is love," or going backward from "God is love" to Ruth's love. It's like a bumper sticker I saw once: "Bob is Bob spelled backward." In other words, no matter how you look at it, from Ruth's angle or God's angle, from the human to the divine, the Beatles were right. "Love is all you need."

I don't want to oversimplify this great book of the Bible, Ruth. There's a lot to it. It's a great lesson about female friendship, two unlikely girlfriends grabbing hold of life for all it's worth. It's a great lesson about a society learning to care for the most vulnerable. The Bible hammers home the demand of God to care for the widow, the foreigner, the poor. And it's a great lesson about love overcoming barriers, all the hang-ups about tradition. No way Boaz should have married that foreigner, that pagan, that enemy from Moab. And yet, their love, their forbidden marriage, is given a whole book in the Bible, AND their mixed marriage, in defiance of all the laws and customs of the day, produced the blood line of Jesus, the Savior of the World. Love is greater than anything else.

Tuesday night Alida and I headed up to Yale for a spectacular literary event held in the elegant Presidents' Room of Woolsey Hall. It was hosted by Christian Wiman, a Yale Divinity School professor. You may remember him as the author of *My Bright Abyss*, which I pushed hard last summer, a brilliant book about life, faith, dying, grief, and hope. And he was just the host! The guest was Dana Gioia, the famous head of the National Endowment for the Arts, a brilliant poet.

In introducing his poems, Gioia said that every poet sits down to write "the greatest poem ever written" and usually about half-way through it, you really think it is "the greatest poem ever written," so then you finish it, you put it aside for a few months, pick it up again, and you wonder whether you should ever let it see the light of day!

That process perfectly describes the poem I'm about to read, based on today's Bible story, the story of Ruth. The opening refrain shouted at me one morning while I was walking on the running track at Fairfield U.

*The truth is  
Ruth is  
love*

The rest of the poem took work, for good or ill. But that opening says all you need to know about Ruth.

## **Ruth (The Book of Ruth)**

*The truth is  
Ruth is  
love  
exceptional  
unconditional  
no isms in the way  
no tribalism or fundamentalism or nationalism  
no icity of ethnicity  
no jokes about inlaws as outlaws  
no silly barriers of pride or place  
the truth is  
Ruth is  
love  
given  
received  
offered  
believed  
turning yesterday's sorrow  
into love's tomorrow.  
The truth is  
Ruth is  
Love.*