

Holy and gracious God, may your Holy Spirit give us a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that, with the eyes of our hearts enlightened, we may know the hope to which Christ has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance among us, and the greatness of his power for those who believe. Amen.

I am not someone who likes to be alone. Well, most of the time. I like cozy nights spent at home with Netflix, a good book, my cat on my lap, and the tired out dog at my feet. But other than that, I am someone who has always greatly valued community. I have always appreciated having someone to walk alongside me in life, adventure, and faith. It's no surprise to me that this refrain was stuck in my head all week.

Sing: We Will Walk with God: [we will walk with God, my brothers, we will walk with God. We will walk with God, my sisters, we will walk with God. We will go rejoicing, till the kingdom has come. We will go rejoicing, till the kingdom has come].

This refrain is a movement outwards, from the church in the building into church into the whole world. But it's not just that; it says again and again, we will walk with God. Especially in the context of the Hebrew Bible Scripture today from Ruth it brings to mind about the continued relationship and companionship as we walk with God and with one another. Faith is not meant to be a solo act. This song sends us forth into the world, reminding us that we are not alone.

We walk with God throughout our whole lives, and we also walk with each other. This is a constant, something that is a privilege that we have as a faithful

people. So today, we are going to think about who walks with us, and why that matters to God.. Today's Old Testament talks about two women who promise to be each other's companions, friends, and chosen family through the rest of their lives. Ruth claims Yahweh as her own, walking with Naomi in faithful community and love. This story shows that from the beginning of the Bible, God is found in community, in those who walk beside others.

Who has walked with you throughout your faith journeys? Who has been the constant who taught you what it means to be a loving and faithful person? This isn't always someone who you still may be in touch with, or someone that even knows the impact they had, but it's someone who glorified what it means to serve faithfully and to love others.

To me, that person was the wife of the pastor at the church I grew up with. Her name, applicably for today's scripture, was Ruth. I grew up at a small congregation with people from many different reformed denominations; it was a union church, which is a big thing in the north. Ruth Dehoff, who has since passed, was a constant in that church. She sang in the choir alongside my dad and I, was always helping me find the secret cookie stash post rehearsals and before church on Sunday mornings, and just emulated welcome in a powerful and radical way. It wasn't something specific that I remember, just that she was a constant in my childhood, a presence that reminded me that there was someone around that would

be willing to greet me and say hi, and welcome this awkward tween and teen with too many questions and too much energy with open arms. She walked with me through my younger years, before I really identified as even Christian, offering a steady presence. She was someone, who though I haven't seen her in over a decade, I still remember with fondness and love. I want to take a minute, and let you all shout out people who have similarly walked with you.

(moment for interaction)

We all have people who have walked alongside us through our faith journeys, and this has been happening since the Hebrew Bible. Faith is not a solitary act; it's something strengthened, stretched and shepherded by community and relationship.

Today's Hebrew Bible text is one of my all-time favorites. Two women, both who have lost everyone they love, one a Jew in a foreign land who lost her sons and her husband, the other a Moabite woman who married a Jew and lost her husband. Two women, bound together.

After the hardship, Naomi, the Jew in a foreign land, decides to go home to her own people. But Ruth refuses to leave her. She clings to her mother in law, and makes the radical decision to follow her, converting to a new religion and culture claiming Yahweh as her own. She sees herself tied to Naomi, uttering the famous lines:

Do not press me to leave you,
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 chooses to walk with Naomi: this is not an easy or simple choice: she is truly turning her life upside down as she leaves her people and her God. But she is also doing something even more radical: she's choosing to walk with Yahweh, our God, for the rest of her life.

She is leaving everything she knows to walk a path that she has never walked before, with a God and community who are foreign to her to spend her life walking alongside someone who she loves. This is a give and take situation, and it's definitely not just a gain. Ruth loses things: her people, her God, the things around her that familiar. Those memories and contexts don't just go away. She does not know what is going to happen when she goes to Bethlehem. She could have remained in her own homeland, remarried, and been content. But Naomi doesn't make the easy choice. But by choosing to go with Ruth, she opens herself up to more love, more community, and a God who we know as the God of love.

Sitting with this text, I read an interpretation from the Jewish study bible that explains that the love of Ruth and Naomi is a model of the Hebrew word *Hesed*, which sometimes gets translated as love. But *Hesed*, as is typical in Hebrew, is a word dripping with meaning and nuance that doesn't easily get translated. *Hesed* is

a love of loyalty and commitment that goes beyond the bounds of law or duty. It's love that breaks boundaries and changes the world. Ruth loves Naomi, in a way that she commits herself too her in this radical way and promises relationship and companionship, and promises to walk with her wherever she goes.

The book of Ruth doesn't mention God explicitly. But many scholars agree that God is found in this *Hesed*, this love between two people who believe in this one God. God is in this companionship as this family promises to walk beside one another in God's name for the rest of their lives. God is in this relationship of two friends walking beside one another. God calls us to be in loving community.

Moving to the New Testament and reading today's familiar passage from Mark, Jesus commands us to partake in love. Jesus says: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

These commandments can't be separated. We love our God when we are in community loving our neighbor. We love our neighbor through loving our God. This to me is the true act of *Hesed* that we seen from the story of Ruth: this deep loyalty and commitment that means God is in the love that we have for each other. God is in the relationships that we form. This is a lifetime of love and support that happens when we are in faith communities such as our own.

By walking with each other, by loving each other as companions and friends, we are with God, loving God and fulfilling God's greatest commandment: to love.

As Ruth says: Where you go I will go.

God is with us as we walk alongside each other, when we support those in our communities, when we show up in radical ways and small ones. God is in that love as we commit as a church that we will show up for the newly baptized child, and God is in the love of weathered hands holding the hands of a young one. God is in the relationship. And friends, these are relationships that happen uniquely in a church community, when those of many generations gather together to walk alongside one another and God.

In this stewardship season, I'm reminded of the benefit of this type of walking alongside each other that happens in Christian communities and the importance of investing in that love. I remember the people who invested in me even when I didn't know that I needed it, and I know that each one of you has people who invested in you as well as people who you have invested in.

Today I want to encourage you to thank those who invested in you, remember them, thank them for their impact in your life. It's in these sacred relationships that we find God and respond to God, in that deep Hesed that can't

simply be summed up in the word love. This is the deep love that only God can provide and that God commands us to be part of.

We are part of a church and community because we love our God, and in that love we have the privilege of walking alongside people through all parts of life. In loving others, we fulfil God's commandment, so today remember that in God we love those around us, and we are commanded to invest in those others as we exist as a church community. God is love, church is love, and that love is truly a gift. Amen.

As God has blessed us, so are we to respond to God's gifts to us. Church, let us give to God our gifts of tithes and offerings.