

I

In our Presbyterian way of being the church, when women and men discern that God may be calling them to leadership in the church as a pastor, we require that they receive formal graduate theological education in an academic institution often referred to as a seminary or divinity school. In the seminary, I learned many important lessons. I learned how to read and translate biblical Greek and Hebrew. I learned about Reformed theology and best practices in preaching worship and Christian education.

But not all the learning was formal, of course. And one of the wonderful things about education is the opportunity to learn from and alongside your peers and future colleagues. So while I learned Hebrew and Greek and preaching and worship from some truly brilliant professors, from my peers, among other things, I learned how to play a card game called No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em, a version of poker.

The game is called no-limit because at any point in the game, a player, if they decide it's worth it, may risk all of their remaining chips, a move that is called "going all-in."

It's a risky move, because if it is unsuccessful, the player stands to lose all of his or her remaining chips, and therefore be out of the game. But if it's successful, in just one hand, it's possible for a player to double or even triple his or her stack of chips.

As I learned, sometimes, the cards just aren't very good to you, and consequently your chip stack starts to get smaller and smaller. Sometimes, the best possible play is to take your best shot, push all of your chips into the middle of the table, and say, "I'm all in."

II

Sooner or later, all of us have or will face that kind of decision in our lives, not just at the card table, but in life. All of us have or someday will come to that point where we decide that even though the hand we've been dealt doesn't feel that strong, even though our resources are small, the best play we can make is to take a deep breath and put it all on the line.

If you've ever stood before God and a congregation and made a marriage vow to another, promising for richer for poorer, for better for worse, in sickness and in health, until death do you part, you know what it is to go "all-in."

If you've ever sworn an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, if you've ever worn a uniform and stood a post, you know what it is to go "all-in."

If you've ever started a business, putting your reputation and your intellect and your sweat and toil out into the marketplace, you know what it is to go "all-in."

If you've ever made a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ, turning from sin and renouncing evil

and its power in the world, turning to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, trusting alone in his grace and love, promising to be his disciple and obeying his Word, you know what it is to go “all-in.”

III

Our story this morning is about a woman who was dealt a poor hand, who watched people all around her fold, but she decided to put it all on the line.

As most of you know, this fall, we have been taking something of a 30,000-foot overview of the Hebrew Scriptures. We’ve heard stories about the great patriarchs of our Israelite ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We’ve heard stories about great leaders like Moses and his encounter with a burning bush and the giving of the Ten Commandments.

When we left off last week, the people of God were about to finally return to the Land of Promise after centuries of living as slaves, after decades of wandering in the wilderness. And when we come our story today, they have done just that.

But they are not yet a nation, at least not in the classical sense. They have no king, no capital city, no real formal military. They are functioning more like a loose confederation of tribes. Whenever legal disputes crop up between the tribes, judges are appointed in order to settle the disputes. Scholars refer to this period of Israel’s history as the period of the judges.

The people of God may have returned to the Land of Promise, their slavery and sojourn in the wilderness may be over, but it’s still a time of tremendous uncertainty, and it’s a particularly violent period in the history of ancient Israel.

The main characters in our story this morning are not patriarchs, nor are they political leaders or judges. Our story this morning is drawn from the book of Ruth, and it centers on three women: an Israelite by the name of Naomi, and her Moabite daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth. So listen now for a Word from God from Ruth 1:1-17.

1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. 6 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

considered his people and given them food. 7 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. 8 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. 9 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. 10 They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." 11 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? 12 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, 13 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." 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. 15 So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." 16 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. 17 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!"

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks bet to God.

Ruth was holding lousy cards. For starters, she was a Moabite, which she knew would make her a persona non grata among her in-laws. In fact, Deuteronomy 23:3 says this, "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord."

Ruth was also a widow with no living adult male relatives. In those days, in that culture, women had no legal rights of their own outside of their husbands, brothers-in-law, or adult sons. So Ruth was a foreigner, a woman, and a widow.

Ruth was holding lousy cards, and Naomi and Orpah were basically holding the same hand.

Since her husband and her sons were dead, and since the famine in her hometown of Bethlehem had come to an end, Naomi decided that her best course of action was to pick up stakes in Moab and return to her hometown of Bethlehem. When Ruth and Orpah turn to follow her, Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their own mothers' houses. And Orpah does just that. She hugs her mother-in-law's neck, and then she takes her leave.

But not Ruth. Even while holding lousy cards, for some reason, Ruth

doesn't fold. She pushes what remaining chips she has left into the middle of the table, and she says to Naomi, "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!"

But Ruth says to her mother-in-law, "I am all in with you. We are in this thing together, come what may."

There's a word in Hebrew called *hesed*, which usually gets translated in English as steadfast love. For Ruth, *hesed* is more important than anything. For Ruth, *hesed* is more important than accidents of race or religion or geography.

And so Ruth goes all-in with her mother-in-law. Despite all the risks, despite the terrible odds, Ruth puts it all on the line with Naomi.

And here's the funny thing about this story. God gets no speaking lines in the entire thing. In fact, God is barely even mentioned at all. There are no burning bushes in this story, no strangers appearing in the middle of the night. In the book of Ruth, you have to look between the lines to see what God is up to.

IV

And I wonder, my friend, if that's how God works through your life? I wonder if God speaks and moves in your life not so much through a booming

voice from the heavens or flashes of lightning in the night sky, but rather in, under, and through the most important relationships in your life. I wonder if for you, more often than not, you have to look between the lines of your life to see what God is up to.

The summer after I turned 14 years old, I went to a basketball camp that was sponsored by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. During the day, we worked on basketball, and during the evenings, we had bible studies and worship. And I remember the pastor saying to all of us young men, "Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is too hard to do by yourself. You need to get yourself connected to a community. I don't care if you don't go to church. I don't care if your parents don't go. You're old enough to get a ride. But you get yourself connected to some men who can show you how to be a disciple, because if you try to do this thing on your own, you'll fail."

Looking back, I can see now that he was encouraging us to find our own Naomi. He was encouraging us to find someone with whom we could practice the Hebrew concept of *hesed*, someone with whom we could push our chips into the middle of the table for the cause of Christ

My friend, you need at least one relationship of *hesed* in your life. You need at least one person with whom you can go all-in for the cause of Christ. This world in which we live values rugged individualism. This world in which we

live teaches us that relationships are primarily for achieving our own selfish ends, and then they can be thrown away at your convenience.

But you, my sister, are called to live in a different way. You, my brother, are called to value people not because of what they can do for you, but simply because they belong to God.

V

Ruth needed Naomi, and Naomi needed Ruth. And you and I, we need each other. That's why we do this thing called church. This is a place where we can experience and reflect *hesed*, steadfast love and loyalty. This is a place where we can say, you know what, we may not be holding great cards, and everyone around us may be folding, but we're all in.

And here's a spoiler alert about Ruth. Ruth will settle with Naomi in a place called Bethlehem. Ruth will marry again, and she will bear a son named Obed, who will become the father of Jesse, who will become the father of David, who will go on to unite this loose confederation of tribes into a unified nation. And many years later, right there in the little town of Bethlehem, some shepherds will be watching over their flocks by night, and an angel of the Lord will say to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah.

My friends, let us never forget that even though we might hold bad cards, even though we feel small and insignificant, though we are finite and limited and vulnerable and prone to all kinds of mistakes, even though more often than not we have to look between the lines of our stories to see the work of God, God is all-in for us. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Ruth and Naomi, is all-in for us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.