

Ruth 1:1-19a

“For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health...till death us do part.” If you are married, these words may have been spoken at your wedding. You and your spouse made this vow to each other.

You heard words strikingly similar to these in our Old Testament reading for today. Ruth, a Moabite woman, made such a vow to Naomi her mother-in-law. This was not a double vow. Ruth made this oath to Naomi, but Naomi did not reply with a vow of her own. Instead, she was thinking, “Why would Ruth make such a vow to me?” She was a lonely old widow. She was heading back to Judah. Ruth was a Moabite. There was nothing for her in Judah; no husband, no family; only a hard life awaited her there. Naomi would become a penniless beggar, and now Ruth wants to join her in this? It made no sense to Naomi. But what more could she say? She had already urged Ruth to return to Moab. But the harder she discouraged her from going with her, the more Ruth clung to her.

The vow that Ruth spoke to Naomi are some of the most beautiful words in the Bible. *“Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”*

A wedding vow is made with the couple expecting a happy life together. True, they say: “for better, for worse...” but they hope that things for the most part will be on the better end. Not so with Ruth. Hers was not a wedding vow, although this was a vow fueled by love; but Ruth knew that to follow Naomi would not bring to her a better life. She made her vow expecting things to be worse, not better; poorer, not richer.

As Christians we follow Jesus, and here, too, we follow Him expecting a life that is difficult. Jesus says so. To be His disciple, we must carry our own cross. We will be persecuted as He was. The world will hate us because He was hated by the world. Anyone who thinks that following Jesus will be better, not worse; richer, not poorer, should return to Moab. It is a hard life that awaits us within the church of our Lord. If we are not prepared to suffer and die with Him, we should make no such vow because the devil will have us eating our words.

As true as this is, it is not what the story of Ruth and Naomi teaches us. In fact, it teaches us the opposite of what we would think. You are not vowing to follow Jesus as Ruth vowed to follow Naomi. Jesus is Ruth in the story and you are Naomi. Jesus vows to go with you, and not you with Him. Ruth is the one expressing love and loyalty. Naomi is the one who is bitter. She has nothing. Everything has been taken from her. It makes no sense that Ruth would vow to go with her, and to stay with her even unto death.

And so with us. We are the ones, like Naomi, who have been dealt with in a harsh manner. We face death as she did. As Naomi was left with nothing, so the devil robbed us at birth of every good gift of God. We were born poor sinners with no hope. As with Naomi, life has dealt us a bitter blow.

And yet our Ruth, the Lord Jesus Christ, does something which makes no sense at all. He vows to go with us in life all the way to the grave. Why? We have nothing for Him. We are but poor beggars. Why would Jesus leave His home above and choose to go with us in life? Love. A love so amazing, so divine, that our puny minds cannot understand it.

Ruth vowed to Naomi knowing what lay ahead of her. And Jesus came into our life, our world, into our human flesh, knowing what was awaiting Him. There was for Him here only suffering and a hard life. A cross awaited Him. Death, our death...the death in hell we deserve was waiting for Jesus. But as Ruth was not deterred from going with Naomi, so it is also with Jesus. Nothing could prevent Him from making His vow, and nothing could keep Him from fulfilling His vow.

Naomi would not travel back to Judah a lonely widow with nothing. Ruth went with her. And because she did, Naomi was blessed in every way. She became part of Ruth's family. To Ruth was born a baby boy. King David was born two generations later from this child. And Jesus Himself was born 1,000 years later from Ruth's descendant, the Virgin Mary. Had Ruth not gone with Naomi, no such blessings would have come. But because of her vow, and her keeping her vow, bitter Naomi became blessed Naomi.

Wherever you are on the road in life; no matter how hard and bitter it has been at times, you are not alone. Your Ruth is walking with you. Jesus made a vow to you in your Baptism, and He will never break His vow. He is not with you only through the times that are good. He is with you for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health. And friend, not even death can part Him from you. He made sure of this by defeating death for you.

Jesus is not going with you in life because you are so fun to be with; because you stay out of trouble so well; because you are such a fine specimen of what a Christian ought to be. Jesus goes with you because you need Him. You are a poor beggar. You have a sinful past that is not pretty. And without Him, you have no future. But friend, Jesus forgives you of your sinful past. That's why He died for you. You are forgiven. God says so. And Jesus gives you a future that is bright. That's why He rose from the grave for you. With Jesus, not sickness, poverty, death, nor the grave, can separate you from Him. He goes with you in life to take you with Him through death into heaven.

Naomi did not ask Ruth to go with her. She even discouraged her from going with her. We have been like this to our Ruth, haven't we? We did not invite Jesus into our life; He invites you into His. There are days when life has us down. We become self-absorbed. We feel unworthy, of no value. Not even Jesus, we think, would want to be with us and go with us in life.

But as Naomi could not push Ruth away, so Jesus refuses to leave you. There is no one more precious to Him than you. Your value is not based upon how you feel on a given day; on how well you live; on what you do for God and others. What determines your value is that the blood of the Son of God was poured out on the cross for you. This is why Jesus clings to you. He cleaves to you. "*Where you go, I will go,*" He vows. As Naomi was brought into Ruth's new family in Judah, so Jesus, in your Baptism, brings you into His family; and you are blessed as Naomi was. You are not alone in life. Jesus goes with you, and your family in Christ is with you.

From here on out, whether your life is better or worse, richer or poorer, full of sickness or health, you need never fear or be anxious. You are Naomi. The first chapter in her life was bitter. But the last chapter was pleasant and blessed, for Ruth went with her. And He, your loving Lord, your Ruth, is with you all the way. Amen.