

# Inheritance



“WELL BEHAVED WOMEN RARELY MAKE HISTORY,” or so the saying goes.

The book of Ruth bears that out. The only well-behaved woman in this story was Orpah—who back in chapter 1, when Naomi dismissed her Moabite daughters in law back to their families so she can return to her hometown of Bethlehem—Orpah was the one who kisses her and said goodbye.

But, as it is, the women we remember from this story are Ruth and Naomi. Two different generations, brought together in a story of survival, mutual dependence, and ultimately, of legacy and history. Naomi’s husband and sons had died. Ruth and Orpah became young, childless widows.

And so the women do what women have done throughout history. They make the best of their circumstances. For Orpah, it means going home to her parents. For Ruth, it involves hitching her wagon to Naomi’s star. “Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God.”

In a world where women had no rights and few options, these women joined together. At the beginning of the story, Naomi’s inheritance is going to be the death of her children. She asks that her friends call her Mara, or bitterness.

At the end of the story, her inheritance is far different. She becomes the grandmother of Obed, who is the father of Jesse, the father of David—the king to whom Jesus’ lineage is traced and to whom Israel will look back for their identity.

Today in worship, we’ll be thinking about the inheritance we leave for the next generations and how we are called to be faithful in uncertain times. The path, we know, is not usually a straight one. History shows us progress bends and turns.

The poet Rainier Maria Rilke gives us this image as we enter worship today.

I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
but I give myself to it.  
I circle around God, around the primordial tower.  
I’ve been circling for thousands of years  
and I still don’t know: am I a falcon,  
a storm, or a great song?  
Let us worship in joy and hope.

## **Ruth 4:1-22**

*No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, ‘Come over, friend; sit down here.’ And he went over and sat down. Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, ‘Sit down here’; so they sat down. He then said to the next-of-kin, ‘Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you.’ So he said, ‘I will redeem it.’ Then Boaz said, ‘The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the*

dead man's name on his inheritance.' At this, the next-of-kin said, 'I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it.'

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, one party took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, 'Acquire it for yourself', he took off his sandal. Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, 'Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.' Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, 'We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.'

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. Then the women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.' Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. The women of the neighbourhood gave him a name, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi.' They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

### **1st Timothy 2:8-15**

*I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.*

LAST WEEK I SHARED A STORY ABOUT AN INTERACTION I ONCE HAD WITH A CAR SALESMAN. And it's a humorous story about how I don't always like to talk about being a pastor with strangers because it opens me up to some interesting opinions. The point of the story wasn't about me being a woman minister, but about the car guy who somehow thought the Book of Ruth maybe should have been called the Book of Boaz.

Being a woman and a pastor in the PCUSA is not news. We've been ordaining women since the 1950s. Women have been shaping the mission and vision of the Presbyterian Church even longer than that through the ministry of the Presbyterian Women, who didn't have structural authority, but used their connections to raise money and awareness for mission work, starting in the 1800s.

When that clip got shared last week on social media though, the story became about women's ordination. And the same kind of strangers I often choose not to talk about women's ordination with in person managed to find the clip and share their opinions online, which is so much worse.

Lots of them, I think, believe that Boaz was the main character in the book of Ruth. They critiqued my preaching style. Preaching from a manuscript was offensive to one. My appearance was offensive to someone else. My sense of humor was offensive to Jesus, for another one. That last critique is absurd. Jesus knows I'm a delight.

And it is a free country, for now, so they can have whatever opinions about me they want to have and none of them impact my work here with you, or our life together as a congregation.

But it reminded me that the issues of Ruth and Naomi's life are still very relevant.

This week the Southern Baptist Convention, which has had a big problem lately with sexual misconduct and abuse by male church leaders coming to light, passed a vote by a large margin to solve that problem by....*let me check my notes...*by banning women from serving in any pastoral role or function in the Southern Baptist Church.

The military has been removing women from positions of power and making their ascension in the ranks much more difficult.

There are people in our government promoting a Christian nationalist agenda who believe women should not be allowed to work outside the home at all. In the year of our Lord 2026 this is happening.

History has its eyes on us, I think. And certainly people—women, queer, trans, gay, and lesbians who are hearing they should be silent, that their voices and their gifts are not useful for society—those people have their eyes on us. **How are we going to speak into this moment?**

We need to amplify our message of welcome, of the inherent dignity of each person, regardless of skin color, regardless of gender identity, or sexual orientation, regardless of socio-economic status. When hate is loud, love must be louder.

What inheritance are we leaving for the next generation?

At the start of worship, I mentioned that Ruth and Naomi get a happy ending, of sorts, Ruth is still “acquired” in a transaction by Boaz at the city gates. As honorably as Boaz behaves in this story, he still buys her as property. No matter how brilliant and gifted Naomi and Ruth are, they are lauded in the story only because Ruth gets pregnant and bears a son.

At the end of the story, Boaz is still Boaz and Ruth is still a Moabite woman—being acquired at the city gates and praised for her fertility. As a mother of sons, I don't discount what must have been her joy in parenthood. But there were many other God given gifts in Ruth that her society never allowed her to share.

At the end of this story, the social order has not been overturned. Women have not gotten the right of inheritance. This is not women's liberation. Ruth and Naomi do not decide they have had enough of being somebody's wife and decide to open a Cafe on Main Street in Bethlehem. *So, what do we do with a text that finds its triumph in the purchase of a woman?*

As we see this issue still being played out today, so how do we handle this inheritance?

Because the lives of these women bore fruit. It took a number of generations, but Jesus was born in their town, from their family tree. And when Jesus entered the scene, everything was different. He brought new life, a new creation to both men and women. The gospel narratives are full of women, traveling with Jesus, eating meals with Jesus, staying at the cross after others had left, and encountering Jesus at the tomb after the men had hidden away in the upper room. The women are right there in scripture, working with Jesus and creating the church. No small thing from a culture where women were treated as property. Our sisters' voices come to us from those Gospel accounts, from the Book of Acts—giving us courage to encounter Jesus today. inspiring us to proclaim the good news.

But I have one more short passage of scripture to share with you now. Listen to these words from 1st Timothy 2:8-15

*“I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach*

*or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty."*

We hear our sisters' voices in Timothy's church too, no matter how much he tries to silence them. How I would love to meet these sisters of our faith. Upon hearing the GOOD NEWS of Jesus Christ, they were compelled to preach, to teach, and apparently with authority. And they seem to have done it while wearing their hair in braids and with lots of gold and jewels.

How do we know they were doing it? Because the writer of the letter takes great pains to tell them to STOP doing it. These women were so transformed by the revelation of Christ that they believed Paul's words that in Christ there is no Jew or Gentile, no slave or free, no male and female. And they took to preaching the gospel. And please don't think I take this text lightly. This is a text I live with each day in my ministry. It was not easy to read out loud.

And while the author's questionable exegesis of Genesis 2 did make it into the canon of scripture, it did not stop women from preaching.

I am able to stand here today because their faith is bearing fruit in our world.

But there are still women who are denied the freedom to respond to their call to preach within their faith tradition, as we mentioned earlier about the Southern Baptist Convention. I hope every woman in the Baptist church showed up to worship today with her hair in braids, adorned in gold, ready to preach. It may not change anything today in their denomination, but I trust God is still at work in those women's lives and will give them a less bitter inheritance than the one their church is trying to leave them.

Or I think of my friend Kelley, who is about to retire after 39 years of ordained ministry. Back in the 90s when she was the associate pastor at a church we served, she was routinely greeted after she preached with comments like *"I don't think women should be preachers. But that was a damn fine sermon."* With grace in her heart and kindness on her face, she changed that congregation's view on women's ordination, one damn fine sermon after another.

It's a complicated inheritance.

I think of how sexism has hurt men too. I don't know if the situation caused Boaz any pain. His story may not have troubled him, but it troubles us. When he was protecting the lives of 2 women, did it occur to him how unjust it was that all the other women were still in such a precarious place? Would he have cared that Ruth only came to him on the threshing floor because he was a man who could provide safety and security for her and not because of who he was as a person? Sexism objectifies men too.

And how did the church get from the picture we have in the gospels and Acts, where women are leading, financially supporting, and evangelizing the faith to the situation in 1st Timothy? How, in a few short generations, were women cut out of the picture?

The author of 1st Timothy was clearly troubled and perhaps threatened by a church in which women were preaching and teaching. Was it hard enough for him, as a representative of this fledgling religion, to convince his pagan or Jewish neighbors that Christianity was a legitimate member of the monotheistic tradition without these WOMEN flouting all social and societal conventions and preaching? Is that how he justified ignoring Paul's words in Galatians about male and female, or the words in Corinthians about a New Creation?

What did he say to his wife? *"Honey, listen. I know you are mad at me. But if we upset too many people, the authorities will arrest us and then where will we be? As soon as people calm down a little about Jesus being God, we'll let women preach again. I promise. You just have to be patient."*

I, of course, have no idea if 1st Timothy's author was conflicted at all about his comments. But we are. It reminds us of the moderate white Christians who told Martin Luther King, Jr. that the time had not quite come for civil rights. The same struggles facing the church right after Jesus' resurrection are still with us today.

Because we live in a world theologians call the "already not yet". God has already liberated the world. We are still living into our liberation. We know that God calls for the flourishing of all of God's children, and yet slavery still exists, patriarchy and sexism still exist, homophobia still exists. Women are still being bought and sold at the city gates.

But we are reminded that we live in the *time after the revelation of the faith of Christ, the time of things being set right by the faith of Christ, the time of the Spirit*. And so we listen for where the Spirit at work in our world and we go there, we participate in the new creation, even as the old creation fights back.

Jesus is Naomi and Ruth's great-great-great-great grandson, the legacy of their cooperation in the midst of an unjust world. He became our savior, who has abolished the dividing walls between man and woman, gay and straight, red state and blue state.

In Christ, we live as people of hope. So how do we go about it?

**Do we survive?** Do we make the best of the situation in which we find ourselves? Like Ruth and Naomi, using their gifts to manipulate the system that considered them no better than property? Or like Boaz, who used his position of respect in the community, not to change the system, but to save two women. Sometimes surviving is enough. And if surviving is what you can do right now, let us help each other do that with grace and kindness.

**Or do we speak out and push back?** The women in Timothy's church knew full well that women did not preach in the synagogues, and they did it anyway, because they were compelled to respond to God's call in their lives. The good news of Jesus ought to be worth talking about, no matter what strangers on the internet might have to say about their opinions on the messenger.

*However we decide to respond to this new hope we have in Christ, it seems clear that we must stand together.*

I am standing on the shoulders of the women who have gone before me. Because of battles they have fought, you have fought, the way has been largely clear for me. And I watch the next generation coming up behind me, and I damn sure want to make sure their path stays clear for them.

I feel as if I am between Ruth and Naomi—seeing both generations with their different responses to the issues women face in the world and not always understanding each other's experience. Rather than uniting in our quest for the flourishing of all people, we disagree over tactics and responses. Some of the voices on the internet saying I shouldn't be a pastor are women.

It would not surprise us to discover that many of the voices in Timothy's church, calling for the women to stop preaching, were women. And what story would we be telling today had Ruth and Naomi not come together? **Your people will be my people.**

*What is our inheritance going to be?*

The story of Ruth makes clear that when people look out for each other, their inheritance is one of legacy. Of history. Of setting in place a lineage that will result in the birth of the very child of God. A legacy of empowering the women and men who come after us to work even more boldly for the Gospel of Christ Jesus and the flourishing of all God's children.

The story of 1st Timothy reminds us that even in scripture, it is not a straight path to liberation. Rights are fought for and obtained. Rights are taken away. We see that through scripture, and throughout history.

It calls us to keep at it. Not to despair when the news is bad. And yes, the news is bad and people can be terrible. But people are also lovely and kind and doing their best to turn the ship, righting our course back toward what God is dreaming for the world. So, we keep at the work we've been called to, in hope and faith that we can leave a better inheritance for the world to come.

I understand how it is easy to despair about the bad news we read. But history has had moments like this in every generation. I do not wish I had been alive through other eras, and smallpox, before antibiotics, during the inquisition. And the news is not all bad. Listen to this story Adam Kinzinger shared this morning about the World Cup, which is taking place here right now:

"The World Cup is here, 48 teams playing across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Each team in the tournament picks a base camp, one town to live and train in between matches. Germany set up shop in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Spain is training in Chattanooga, Tennessee. And Algeria, playing two of its games up the road at Arrowhead (stadium), picked Lawrence and made it home for the summer.

What the people of Lawrence did with that is the part I can't stop thinking about.

It started small, with a whole town of people who had never given Algeria much thought deciding, more or less overnight, that this was their team now. Flags went up in shop windows. Folks pulled on the green jerseys. People drove over just to catch a glimpse of the players. And then a local news crew stopped an older gentleman on a Lawrence sidewalk, standing in front of a storefront draped in a whole row of Algerian flags he had clearly just gone out of his way to find.

They asked him what he actually knew about the country whose colors he was flying. He grinned, paused for a beat, and said something along the lines of: not much yet – but we want to welcome you here. There is no agenda in that man. Nothing performative. Just a neighbor, thrilled to his bones that these strangers chose his town, and perfectly at ease with the fact that he has a lot left to learn about them.

The welcome only got bigger from there.

The University of Kansas, the state's flagship school that calls Lawrence home, sent its marching band out to the training ground. They had spent the previous days learning Algeria's national anthem, note for note, and they played it as the players walked out for practice. Think about what that means for a moment.

These men are thousands of miles from their families, living out of a hotel in the American Midwest, preparing for the biggest sporting event of their professional lives. And the first thing they hear when they step onto the grass is the sound of their own country's song, played by a hundred American college kids in red and blue who learned it just for them. Several of the players stopped walking. A few of them looked like they weren't sure what to do with themselves.

Algeria did its part, too. The team opened a training session to the public and spent the afternoon out on the grass with neighborhood kids, walking them through drills, signing autographs, posing for pictures. There are children from small-town America who are going to be telling the story of the day they trained with a World Cup team for the rest of their lives. And the Algerians have spent the last week calling themselves honorary Kansans, falling hard for a corner of a state most of them could not have found on a map two months ago.

But it's not just Lawrence.

This is happening all over the country, in towns you would never expect.

The city of Alexandria, Virginia threw a street festival with an evening of Croatian food and music, and wrapped a city bus in the team's red and white. After crowds in Spokane, Washington flocked to watch Egyptian superstar Mohamed Salah, a brand-new Egyptian restaurant in town suddenly had locals lining up for food most of them had never tasted. All told, 19 American communities that are not

hosting a single match still raised their hand to take in a national team and call them neighbors for a month.

There is a story we get told constantly about who we have become. That Americans have soured on outsiders. That we have decided the rest of the world is a threat. That we look at people who do not talk like us or pray like us or come from where we come from and see a problem instead of a person.

And then a college town in Kansas goes and learns every note of a North African country's national anthem, just so a group of strangers feel at home for a few weeks. An old local stands in front of a row of its flags and tells them, in so many words: we don't know much about you yet, but we are awfully glad you came.

That is who we actually are when nobody is telling us to be afraid. The band on the field, playing somebody else's song as if it were their own. The neighbor who knows next to nothing about you and waves you in anyway. We forget it sometimes. The good news is that it takes about one afternoon to remember.

I'm so thankful I'm alive right here and right now, here with you in this moment in this city, in this congregation. God has called us to be each other's people, to seek the welfare of this city, to amplify God's liberating message of love and hope, and to have fun while we do it. I'm pretty hopeful about what kind of inheritance that will create for the next generations.

Amen.

