

Rev. Sara M. Holland's Installation Sermon

By Rev. Daryn Stylianopoulos

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Good morning, It is so good to be with you Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ. On behalf of First Baptist Church in Needham, and the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts, I bring greetings. I am humbled and grateful to have this opportunity to share in the Word with you, and to honor your commitment to a dear friend of mine - Sara Holland. And to celebrate her calling to this community.

A little backstory - I met Sara in seminary at Boston University School of Theology, and somehow or another we learned that we were both from Lexington, NC - a small, BBQ centric, town not too far from Winston-Salem. I learned that Sara played soccer with my sisters and possibly me too at some point, though I was older. I also learned that her Dad was a pastor in town. My grandfather was also a pastor in Lexington. Anyways, small world connections always make my heart a little bit happy. It's just a reminder that we are a lot more connected than we might think we are. This small world connection was all the more a great blessing, because I got to know Sara and got to witness her beautiful way of ministering in the world; of working delicately yet boldly toward lived expressions of inclusive love and beloved community.

Sara is a dear friend and colleague, a brilliant and thoughtful pastor - and one heck of a soccer player - who is dedicated to the work of her calling, to the work of justice and the Gospel of Jesus. She's just incredible and you're so lucky to have her with you for a time. And

please don't forget that ... please tell her and remind her of that often. It matters. It makes a difference. She's here for you, she's praying for you, she'll show up for you, she is dedicated to you and not just to you individually, but to every single person in this congregation - that's significant. It is worth honoring and celebrating (This is something that I can say to you that she cannot say to you - look after your pastor. Take care of her. Offer rest, offer encouragement.

When Sara asked me to preach, and told me that she was really hoping the theme of the service could be family ... on the one hand I was elated, because what better thing to preach about for an installation service than family. On the other hand, I kind of did one of those faces ... eee... okay. 'Cause family is not always a happy or easy topic for folks, and can get a little messy, because families are a little messy, because humans are a little messy.

Family is complicated. Especially when we think of it through our predominate cultural lens of biological family. So many have been hurt by family or have never felt at home in their families of origin.

But in the story of Ruth, the redemptive model of family is not about biology It is about intention. It is not about biological connections, it is about cardiological connections --- about a heart's willingness to be a part of another's story.

There is an image by Chinese artist, He Qi, that depicts Ruth and Naomi. In the painting Ruth and Naomi are so visibly intertwined that you cannot tell them apart. They are together - bound up in one another's story, in commitment, in possibility, in love - That is what Ruth's story

of family is about - an intentional commitment to hold on and stick with, to share in possibility, in restoration, in hope, and in promise.

You all have had the amazing privilege of being together a year or so already. And you came into your ministry together in a really difficult and trying time for churches, and for pastors. You had a lot to figure out about worship and connection and distancing, about masks and vaccines and all manner of protocols. All of that compounding the reality that you have a new pastor and she is learning a new place and new people - that you all are learning how to navigate one another and navigate this pandemic all at the same time. Transitions are hard enough when they happen in the best of circumstances. We have not been living through the most wonderful of circumstances - in case that was news to anybody. It's been difficult. And yet, you have honored what it means to stick by one another, to continue to hope toward life-giving possibility even when there is so much hardship and pain around you and in our world.

One of the things that stands out to me about Ruth's commitment to Naomi is that they have no guarantees about anything other than their commitment to one another. That's it. And on top of that, there is nothing to suggest that this commitment is going to go well for them. I don't mean to suggest that this commitment you are making today will not go well ... I hope and pray that it does. But, Ruth and Naomi have no guarantees, and we can't always know what is ahead for us. When we find them at this point in the story of Ruth - and Naomi is pretty despondent. They are in the midst of a heartbreaking and difficult journey together --- they have lost dearly beloved members of their family, and in this passage of scripture they are just trying to figure out how they're going to make it through to tomorrow.

Naomi has recently lost her husband and two sons - no one is obligated to care for her. She is too old to remarry and bear children, and her daughters-in-law stand a better chance of success in life if they go back to their homes and remarry and have families of their own. Naomi has no one left. And so Naomi's plan is to go alone, back to Bethlehem - in the hopes that maybe her community will receive her, and have mercy on her. But there is no guarantee of that either.

This is where we are in our passage of scripture this morning - In a place of no guarantees. No expectations. And uncertainty... This is where we are when we hear the words of Ruth --- It is into a scenario of uncertainty that Ruth's words of commitment are offered: Ruth clung to Naomi saying:

“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!”

Into the difficulty, into the pain, into the unknown - Ruth offers all that she has to give: her heart and an invitation to family. Ruth commits to

Do not duplicate hold on, to not let go, to be a part of Naomi's journey, to offer something of herself to Naomi's story to Naomi's future. And so, they offer that fundamental and basic thing, Ruth and Naomi --- their hearts, their will, their intention to be with one another. They choose to commit themselves to one another, to weave their stories together toward a common purpose, a common hope, a common promise - come what may.

Plymouth Congregational and Sara, you are making a commitment today - a fundamental and intentional willing of yourselves to one another - that you will hold on and not easily let go when things get difficult. That you will cling to one another and accompany one another, even into the unknown, even in uncertain circumstances - because you recognize that we are not meant to navigate this world or this ministry alone, because we need each other, because you trust that through this kind of holy commitment, God can work some amazing promise for the world --- because you recognize that there is some goodness, some holiness in being family together.

Part of being intentionally family together means bringing all of who we are - our various opinions and persuasions to one another - AND - receiving those with grace as we become a part of each others' stories - a shared story - OUR story - no longer MY story. Our story. We become a part of a shared story - mine isn't the only one...

Remember that though the book is named for Ruth, she isn't the only one this story is about --- her story is only possible because of Naomi, because of Boaz, because of the women in her community - because of the intentional grace, support and creative spirit of the whole cast of

characters as they work together for the good of one another - toward possibility they could never realize on their own.

Because of all of those characters and their commitment toward hope for one another --- at the end of the book of Ruth --- a child is born - Obed - who brings restoration and hope to the heart of Naomi, to the future of Ruth, and to the world. We are told Obed is a grandfather of King David, and an ancestor of Jesus. And so it is that through their intentional commitment to one another - through their creation of family for one another - something of our Gospel is born.

There may be moments in your ministry when you feel like Ruth and Naomi - when it feels really difficult to have hope, or when you experience significant loss and pain together. There will be times when the future feels uncertain. There will be times when you don't agree on everything. And there will certainly be moments of disappointment. We all have our expectations, our ideas, our hopes about how church will be done and what the future will bring - and that's all fine and good. But if and when things go in a different or new direction, if and when your expectations are not met, or something of the way things have always been shifts ...

Rather than giving up, or walking out on each other, or blowing up at each other, remember this story of Ruth and Naomi - remember that it is into their most difficult moments that the most beautiful words of promise are spoken; remember the intentionality of their commitment to stand by one another into the unknown and through change and transition and the uncertainties of the future. Remember that they choose to be family to one another - and that it is through that holy commitment that something of God's good news enters the world.

This Holy act of choosing to become family for one another - of showing up and bearing with one another, with intention - united in purpose and spirit - is deeply intrinsic to our faith, to our Christian witness.

Jesus, too, exercised in his ministry and toward his hope for goodness in the world, an intentional forming of family - an intentional weaving of stories that were not limited to his biological connections, but were about ever expansive ways of understanding connection and family - about intentional commitment to God and to one another in this world through love, forgiveness, justice and grace:

In Matthew Chapter 12: 47

Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”[a] 48 But to the one who had told him this, Jesus[b] replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” 49 And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in Do not duplicate heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus chose to create family in this world, to be intentional about continuing to expand what family can mean. His disciples were a part of that legacy of commitment, are woven and welcomed into his own story of family. And we, in our following of Jesus, are choosing and committing to weave our own stories together - alongside all of the saints who have gone before us - into that larger narrative of family, of possibility and promise. We choose to participate in a collaborative salvific and inclusive ministry that offers good news to the poor, release

to those held captive, new ways of seeing when we could not before, freedom for those oppressed and in bondage, and a proclamation of God's love and good intentions toward life-giving goodness for all. That is the story we tell when we choose to weave ourselves together in this Christian legacy. And that is that story you are telling this morning as you - Sara and Plymouth Congregational - weave your stories together in commitment, in the hope of life-giving promise - as you become family to one another.

Through this sacred commitment, you are offering something of life giving hope, of miraculous goodness and possibility to the world that none of you could ever realize on your own.

Today, as Ruth's words of commitment live in our hearts, as her story of intentional relationship and care is woven into our own - as Jesus's vision of good news and ever expansive family speaks to our belovedness and belonging, and as the names and witness of the saints continue to pervade our understanding of beloved community and communion, as your youth group paints their food pantry this morning - yet another invitation to community and provision - and as you text, and call, and write your friends, You have family in God and you have family in me, and as you - with God as your witness - profess your intention to serve alongside one another in ministry, in a spirit of love, in good times and difficult times - I pray that through the Do not duplicate holy act of saying yes to the belovedness in one another - in the sacred and intentional act of creating family together - of weaving your stories together - a new Gospel story of life-giving possibility, will be born into this world through you and your ministry here. Blessings on your ministry. Blessings on your family. May it be so. Amen.