

“Where you go, I will go”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Ruth 1:1-18*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Today’s sermon begins with a story. The story of how a dog became a national hero. Hachiko was born in Japan, a peach white fluffy Akita Inu, and was adopted by a professor at Tokyo University. The two quickly became inseparable. Hachiko accompanied the professor every morning to the train station as he went to work, and sure enough, every afternoon, Hachiko was there at the station waiting for the professor as he came home. The professor loved Hachiko. The dog was the closest thing to a child he ever had. And Hachiko loved him. And so their life went on, walking together to the train station and back, until May 21, 1925, when Hachiko was sitting in his usual spot at the station. He waited, and he waited, and he waited. No professor. At the age of just 53, he had died suddenly during a lecture.

Hachiko went on to be adopted by another family. He moved away. But he never stopped waiting. Every day, for nine years, nine months, and 15 days, Hachiko walked to that train station every afternoon, waiting for the professor—his professor—to step off that train and finally, after so long, come home. Hachiko became a national icon of loyalty and faithfulness.

Those of us who have had the privilege of loving someone—I mean really loving them—are a bit like Hachiko, I think. It may even be why we come here every Sunday morning, or pray at night, or crack open that old Bible—because a part of us is waiting, hoping, insisting that they’re not gone; there’s just this train somewhere, delayed.

Naomi knew this love, and this sorrow, more than most. Naomi buries in the soil of Moab not only her husband but her two sons as well. Grief binds together three women, Naomi and her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah. Naomi decides to go home, to go back to the land she and her family had fled because of a famine years ago, back to Bethlehem. She tells Ruth and Orpah to stay in their native land, saying, “Go, return each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord make for you *chesed* (steadfast, unbreakable love) just as you have made with the dead and with me.” To her surprise, both refuse. She kisses them on the forehead. They cry together. And eventually, Orpah relents and goes home. But not Ruth. Ruth, the Bible says, “clings” to Naomi.

John Holbert explains: “This word, ‘clung,’ has a long history in Israel. Perhaps its most famous use is in Genesis 2 where we are told that a man ‘clings’ to his woman and they become thereby one flesh. It is a most intimate verb, and should be taken as a sign of the deepest devotion, an unwillingness to let go under any circumstances.”

The chapter ends with Ruth and Naomi walking together down a long road to Bethlehem and to a future that will make Ruth the great-grandmother of King David and the ancestor of Jesus Christ himself. All because Ruth discovered the meaning of Naomi’s blessing, of *chesed*, a Hebrew, godly word meaning “steadfast, unbreakable love.”

It wasn't the practical thing to do. It went against all the advice and counsel of the world, which says to move on and let go, even forget. It went against a world that tries very hard to make us believe that everything, and everyone, is indeed quite breakable and never quite so steadfast.

But Ruth, despite it all, held on. And we are here today because we too are holding on. It's why we light candles in the dark, and toll the bell, and speak the names. Because we're holding onto each other, and we're not letting go. Because there's Someone who held onto us, with a love so steadfast that it endured the cross, a love passed down from generation to generation, from Ruth, to David, to Jesus. Unbroken.

We belong to that love.

For the Israelites, the greatest hope, and honor, was to be buried with one's ancestors, to rest in the soil of one's people, to return to the fathers and mothers known and loved. And so Ruth speaks of being buried in the same land where Naomi will be buried. It wasn't until much later in Hebrew and Christian thought that a concept of heaven developed. But we can see our idea of heaven rooted in this early theology: a promise to be with one's people. A promise that there are some bonds that cannot be broken.

“Where you go, I will go.”

It was Ruth's love that would not have her parted from Naomi. And it was the love of God that faced down death for us, and refused to be parted from us—that we might know where the road ends, where the train waits.

It ends with all the people of God brought together again.

Every time we speak their names, every time we light these candles, every time we laugh or cry at a memory, every time we live as if they were with us, every time we speak praise in the dark, we proclaim a gospel of love steadfast, love unbroken. We have needed that gospel so much in the past weeks, in the face of so much violence. Today, we make a proclamation of love undefeated by hate and death. We cling to that love, as Ruth did to Naomi.

Together, on this earth, and in the life to come, we shall be reunited.

After his death, Hachiko's ashes were buried beside those of his beloved professor. And in 2015, a statue was unveiled showing the professor stepping from the train, his briefcase placed on the ground, his arms waiting for Hachiko. Hachiko sees him and jumps in the air to greet his long-lost professor. Finally home. Finally together again.

So let us light our candles, and toll our bells, and sing our songs, and speak our names, and live confident in the gospel that says such a moment awaits us all. We will be, and in fact already are, together again. **Amen.**