8-21-16 Springboro FUMC

Ruth 1:1-17

Pastor Amy Haines

The Messiness of New Beginnings

It was almost a month ago when I was added into the “messy” sermon series following my introduction to staff parish. At that time, I came close to titling this sermon “Culture Shock.” For like Ruth following Naomi back to Israel, my family following me back to SW OH has and will continue to be an adjustment to a new culture. And adjusting to a new culture is messy.

I grew up two exits south on I-75 in Hunter, graduating from Franklin High School, yet have not lived in this area for over 25 years. My church family was First UMC Middletown. So even though this is “coming home” for me, this home area has changed a lot over these many years.

SW OH is also a different culture than the rural flatlands of NW OH, where I have lived for the past 17 years.

In NW OH a traffic jam was a combine taking up both lanes of a rural road or an oversized load going slow on the state highway.

In NW OH traveling 30 minutes to the nearest Walmart or McDonalds or for Sunday dinner was considered normal.

In NW OH roads were so flat you could see the headlights of oncoming cars for miles.

I know we aren’t in NW OH anymore when there is more than one stoplight in town, when we have curbside recycling, and when the school district operates more than one building.

My first culture shock of this move came on Meet the Teacher Day at Dennis Elementary, when we hit the line of cars just off of 73, and we came over the hill to cars parked everywhere. Then we had to figure out what door to enter and what hallway held Timothy’s classroom.

Literally, I think the entire town of Pandora, OH, where we most recently worshipped and the boys attended school, that entire town would fit within the footprint that is the Springboro High School complex.

Timothy realized we weren’t in NW OH anymore when he tried to ride his three-wheeler on the driveway on move in day and struggled with the slight incline.

Adjusting to a new culture is part of the messiness of new beginnings.

And I recognize today that we are not the only ones encountering such messiness.

You as a church family are also dealing with the messiness of this pastoral transition. For some of you Suzanne was the only pastor you knew here. It is OK to acknowledge the grief, excitement and uncertainty that surround this pastoral change. The timing of this transition surprised us all as an off cycle move.

Then there is the physical messiness of updates that have occurred this past month at the parsonage and at the church. At the house, new paint and carpet went in around boxes and between moving trucks. At the church, walls have been painted, new flooring has been installed in the main preschool classrooms, and Bright Beginnings teachers have been trying to find what got moved where even as the new school year began.

Personally some of you are adjusting to the messiness of new beginnings at home, work or school.

How many students here today switched school buildings and encountered a new schedule this year?

How many parents here today are sending kids off to college this month?

How many of our members have buried a loved one this year?

How many of our members are facing changes at work?

Consider other new beginnings that we encounter throughout our lives-

Each school year brings different teachers and different students in the class

A new couple will face new family rituals, especially around holiday traditions

A new job, a new house, especially in a new city is a new beginning

Retirement

Becoming a widow or widower

Dealing with the loss of a parent or a child

All of these and more are moments of transition in our lives.

And any change in our routine, in our priorities, in the way things are done has the potential to be a messy moment in our lives.

Messy moments are those times that pull us out of our comfort zone, moments that may cause us to act in a different way, moments that challenge what we know, or moments that we are not sure how to handle.

With each new beginning also comes a myriad of emotions- sometimes fear and uncertainty, sometimes peace and excitement, sometimes all of those and more in the span of a few minutes or a few days.

Yet we are not the first, nor will we be the last, to experience the messiness of goodbye and hello, of endings and new beginnings.

Consider the biblical new beginnings that had an element of messy uncertainty about them:

The Israelites wandered in the desert for 40 years before they could cross over into the Promised Land. And when they finally did cross over they had a new leader in Joshua.

On Pentecost 3000 believers were added to the ranks of Jesus’ closest followers. Later, as Jesus’ followers spread throughout the Roman Empire, the church had to expand beyond the leadership in Jerusalem. Each stage of growth for the early church brought its own messy new beginning.

Then Paul arrived in Damascus blind and believing in Jesus. This drastic change from persecutor to proclaimer tested the faith and trust of the first disciples, and his ministry with the Gentiles expanded the church beyond anyone’s expectations.

I could also mention Abraham and Sarah, Mary and Joseph, the return from exile, and many more. Each one of our biblical ancestors has a story of a messy new beginning, often reflecting our human weaknesses, yet also proclaiming the presence of God.

Look around you at this building. Years ago our faith ancestors stepped out in faith to begin our predecessor congregations then later merged those into First Church. More recently others stepped out in faith with the creation of Bright Beginnings Preschool and the hiring of directors for youth and adult discipleship rather than receiving another appointed pastor.

If I asked for your stories of faith today I imagine I would also hear stories of reluctant trust, of uncertain hope, of stepping out in faith unsure where your steps would lead yet knowing who went with you.

Life is full endings and new beginnings. Change is a constant in our lives.

Yet what has not changed, what is still the solid rock of faith on which we stand, is that God is still God. Jesus is still our Savior and Lord. The Holy Spirit is still an unexpected presence in our lives.

God is still God, even in the midst of our messy lives.

God’s promises and presence, God’s guidance and grace, are still gifts to you and I today.

God goes before us into the messiness of new beginnings, and God goes with us as we face our new beginnings with uncertainty or with hope.

No matter where we find ourselves on the journey of life, of faith, of ministry, God is with us.

There will be times in our messy lives, however, when we may question this bedrock of our faith and wonder where God is, much like Naomi in the beginning of the story of Ruth.

In our lives it often happens around times of tragedy or illness, times of struggle or loss.

For Naomi she struggled with her faith when faced with the tragedy of the death not only of her husband, but also both of her sons. Naomi had followed her husband to Moab when famine had hit the land of Judah. There they found themselves strangers in a strange land. Then Elimelek died. Then both sons died. And Naomi was left with her two Moabite daughters- in-law, three widows without children and husbands to care for them.

At that time a woman’s sole purpose in life was to marry and have children. Naomi now found herself with no purpose, no protection and no promises that life would ever get better. She was at this time a bitter woman feeling that God had left her.

Yet God was still God.

And God began to work through the people around Naomi.

One day Naomi heard that God had come to the aid of his people and the famine was finished in the land of Judah. So she determined to return home to live out her days relying on the generosity of whatever relative might take pity on her.

Yet when she sought to leave, her daughters-in-law begged to go with her.

Naomi tried to dissuade them. Maybe it was because of her bitterness, maybe it was because of her poverty, or maybe it was because she knew how unwelcome the Moabite women would be in Judah, she urged them to return home, find new husbands, make babies and have a good life.

Orpah reluctantly obeyed, making the reasonable choice, weeping at their separation, yet Ruth stubbornly insisted she was going with Naomi. Ruth clung to her mother-in-law, and boldly declared her commitment not only to Naomi, but also to Naomi’s God.

“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.” (16-17a)

Ruth was determined to be present with Naomi, through thick and thin, much like God determines to be present with us in the calm and in the messy moments of our lives.

Ruth and Naomi are two very different women, from very different backgrounds, yet they step out in faith, toward Bethlehem, with a love, care and commitment to one another that we need more of in our world today.

This Moabite woman and her Jewish mother-in-law show us the importance of living by faith in the messiness of life as well as the importance of having someone to journey with us through the best of times and the worst of times.

Can you name people, expected and unexpected, whom God has placed in your path, to guide you on your journey of faith? Growing up I was surrounded by a church family that supported my biological family in raising me in the Christian faith. In college I found a small group of my sorority sisters who were believers from various backgrounds, including one who was United Methodist turned Pentecostal and another who was Catholic.

Ruth and Naomi did not know what would await them in Judah. I imagine Naomi had no hope for a better life than the subpar existence of a widow with no family. I imagine Ruth wondered what type of hostile reception she would get as a Moabite woman, even one who had come to believe in the God of Israel. Yet they still stepped out in faith, trusting God to guide them, knowing that faith is more about belonging than believing, knowing that not only did they belong with one another but they also belonged to God.

If you go home today and read the rest of the story of Ruth—which is very short and easy to read—you will find that at the end of their journey is an unexpected, hope-filled new beginning.

Ruth, a Moabite convert, marries Boaz, a Jewish man, and gives birth to a son who becomes the grandfather of King David. Ruth is now listed in the genealogy of Jesus. Naomi’s faith in God is restored.

And if God can work through the messy story of a Moabite woman who becomes an ancestor to Jesus, God can work through the messy new beginnings in our lives.

We just have to be open to God’s presence with us on the journey of life, of faith, of ministry.

Tom Ehrich once shared these words about the journey of following Jesus:

.. Following Jesus isn't about arriving somewhere. There is no specific destination, no station whose sign announces, "Found it"...

Faith is a journey. It takes us beyond memory, beyond understanding, beyond comfort, beyond control. Faith is about a road, not a specific place on the road. Along the way, we will see new things, as Jesus promised, hear new words, reconsider old words. New companions will appear, and they will stretch us. New needs will require us to abandon former ways of perceiving reality.

We will feel tongue-tied, confused, rootless and unsettled. And that is exactly where Jesus wants us to be. For then we can share Abraham's journey to a land he had never seen, and Moses' journey to a land that existed only as promise, and the exiles' return to a home they couldn't find, and Jesus' journey to a hill outside the city and then beyond their sight.

--Tom Ehrich, On a Journey e-newsletter, June 24, 2004, morningwalkmedia.com/on-a-journey.

Found in “Get Up and Go” 11-4-12 homileticsonline.com

One of my favorite movies is the Wizard of Oz, which I see is the feature at LaComedia right now. How many of you can sing or quote much of that musical by heart?

For the few who don’t know the storyline, Dorothy is caught up in a twister at her aunt’s farm, where she lives in Kansas, and finds herself transported over the rainbow to the land of Oz. Her house lands on a wicked witch, whose ruby slippers magically appear on her feet as the other wicked witch will do anything to get those slippers. With the help of a good witch and some unexpected characters, Dorothy sets out on a journey to see the great Wizard of Oz in order to get home. Yet the only instructions she are given to get to the wizard is to follow the yellow brick road. Her adventures occur along the journey to Oz, along the yellow brick road, including three very unlikely new friendships with the lion, the scarecrow and the tin man.

The older I get and the longer I am in ministry, the more I see how our faith journeys are like Dorothy’s journey to Oz. In the past 6 weeks I have begun a journey down a road that I don’t know, yet I trust God to guide me. I know that as we go forward together, we may develop some unlikely new friendships. And there will be times, especially in the culture we now live in, where our faith and our friendships will be tested, both individually and together as the body of Christ.

Yet as we journey, even if we sometimes take one step forward and two steps back, even if we sometimes have many traveling companions and sometimes have few, remember that God is with us. To offer us hope, to offer us help, to offer us His Presence on this journey. God is with us.

Ruth’s words are echoed today in a song by Chris Tomlin that is often heard on contemporary Christian radio. The lyrics to “I Will Follow You” include these words:

Where you go, I'll go

Where you stay, I'll stay

When you move, I'll move

I will follow you

Who you love, I'll love

How you serve I'll serve

If this life I lose, I will follow you

If you have ever sung these words, or hymns like Trust and Obey or I Surrender All, do you live by the words we sing?

In the midst of the messiness of new beginnings or even in the midst of the messiness of daily life, do we step out in faith, in trust, in hope, following God often where we did not plan to go, willing to engage in the messiness of ministry in the ways God calls us?

My challenge to you today is to be open to the next step that God is calling you to take. It may be a step of faith at work, at school, at home, or with a friend. It may be a step of faith to serve in a new way at church or in the community.

My encouragement to you today is to remember that wherever that next step takes you, God is already there. Trust in God’s peace and presence, God’s guidance and grace, in every messy or mundane moment of your life.

May it be so. Let us pray.