

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Ruth 1:1-18

This morning I want to begin with this true story. I don't remember how many years ago it was now, but it's been quite a few. My husband Don went on his first mission trip. This trip took him to Honduras for about two weeks. I don't remember where or how he got the idea that he wanted to do this, but I remember feeling surprised and pleased. The experience was very enlightening for him. On the return trip, the plane made a stop in Miami. From there he gave me a phone call to tell me that their flight was delayed because of weather.

During that phone conversation, I asked him how the trip went. The response that I got had me a little worried. With a less than enthusiastic tone, he said, "It was okay." I asked him if he would go again, and he said, "Probably not." All that I could think to say to him was that maybe he will feel differently after he gets some rest and takes some time to reflect on his experience. His reply was a very hesitant, "Maybe."

After several hours, his flight finally arrived at Harrisburg airport. As we drove home, Don began telling me about his experiences. I heard about the hair-raising flight into Tegucigalpa. The plane needed to do a near flip side-ways and then a nose dive to land at the airport tucked in between the mountains.

There was then the harrowing experience of stuffing the group and all of their things in a van that was falling apart. The van was in such bad shape that the side sliding door totally fell off and needed to be put on again when they left the airport. The group was warned not to lean against the door otherwise it would likely fall off again while they were riding. The journey took them on dirt roads along the sides of mountains and over bridges made of rope and boards that extended over rivers which ran far below them. Sometimes, the group had to get out of the van and walk across the bridges because if they stayed in the van while it tried to cross, the van would be too heavy for the bridge. Don has a fear of heights, so crossing rope and board bridges high above rivers was anxiety ridden moments for him. Don said it was a miracle the van made it across without the extra weight.

Their accommodations were less than desirable. They stayed in a clay block building with a dirt floor. The building had no windows, only slats to provide protection from rain. Upon entering their home for the first time, someone holding a flashlight zeroed in on a huge tarantula on the wall. Now, there are not many things that my husband does not like, but he absolutely hates spiders, so this encounter with a hairy large spider, sent him wondering what the heck he was doing there (not his words), and he immediately wished he could sleep in the van. However, he didn't. Everyone in the group slept close together with their sleeping bags up over their head every night even though the weather was beastly hot and humid. They were warned that during the night it was nothing for tarantulas and scorpions to climb over you while you sleep.

Every night before climbing into the sleeping bag, they needed to check their sleeping bags for any critters, and there were many nights when they did find surprises, or they would awake during the night to one climbing over them. Don said he did not get a lot of sleep any night, even though he would be exhausted after a day of hard work carrying rocks and cement up the steep side of the mountain to use in building homes.

This was not the kind of thing he was expecting, even though he was warned that conditions would be harsh. But the good news is that after he told his story again and again, he realized that it wasn't about him. He felt overwhelmed with compassion and sadness for the people who lived in those horrendous conditions under a controlling and selfish government. It did not take long for him to feel the burning desire to return to Honduras. In fact, he was planning to make the trip again just a few years later, but then he fell off a ladder and crushed his heel about that time and was unable to go for one of the last trips made to that particular area. Later he did two three-week missions trips to Nigeria.

Don took a risk going into what was an unknown for him to do God's work. I don't think I could ever go on a mission trip like that, and, thank goodness, God doesn't expect all of us to go to places like Honduras and take risks of that nature. But following God does have its risks—it is inevitable.

Ruth, was a risk-taker. We find in today's scripture that Naomi's and Ruth's story begins with Naomi's husband, Elimilech who took Naomi and their two sons to the land of Moab because their homeland was experiencing a devastating famine. In Moab, there was plenty of food. The only problem was that the Israelites were forbidden to associate with the Moabites. The Israelites were the chosen people of God. The Moabite

people descended from a family who had done an unthinkable thing that was against God's teachings. So, to keep the bloodline of the chosen people of God pure, the Israelites were expected to stay away from the people who went against God's will.

While they lived in Moab, Elimelech died. Naomi's two sons married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, but before either of them had any children—in particular, sons—to carry on the family name, Naomi's sons died too.

That left the three women with no one to help them survive. In those days, if a woman's husband died, it was the responsibility of the next of kin, a man, of course, who was supposed to take the woman in. If she had no sons to carry on the family name, he was supposed to make her his own so that she could bear children, hopefully sons. Naomi had no one and she did not have any more sons to offer Ruth and Orpah for husbands.

Naomi learns that things are better back in her homeland and decides to return to it. She tells Ruth and Orpah to return to their mothers, which Orpah eventually does; but Ruth insists on going with Naomi. So, the two women make the journey to Bethlehem. Neither knew exactly what life would be like when they got there, but of the two, Ruth was taking the bigger risk.

She was going to a strange land where she was not welcome because she was a Moabite. She was leaving her own family behind. The likelihood of her finding someone to marry her in Bethlehem and give her sons was slim to none. She would not even have a familiar God or faith that she could practice.

We discover later in the story that Ruth gleaned fallen grain for Naomi and her in a field owned by a man named Boaz. By law, she was actually forbidden to do that because she was a foreigner, but because, as it turns out, Boaz was a distant relative to Naomi, he allows her to do so. This began a very good turn of events for these two women.

Ruth had given up **everything** to go with Naomi. But the good that was to one day come never would have happened had Ruth not taken the risk to go with Naomi. How many of us have been or would be willing to walk away from everything we know to begin a new life in a place where we would be considered an outcast, without knowing what the future held for us?

From this story we learn that taking a risk requires making a choice to have faith. Faith requires making a commitment. And faith is an adventure. Ruth made the choice to go with Naomi. Ruth was a risk-taker. I can't help but think that Ruth must have seen something special in Naomi's life that she did not see in other Moabite women. The difference that Ruth witnessed in Naomi, very likely, had everything to do with Naomi's faith in God, and how she lived out her faith, especially through the loving way Naomi welcomed Ruth, a Moabite, into the family.

We learn from this story that having faith in God is a choice. Taking God at God's word is a choice. It is not a feeling. You might say, "I don't feel like getting up today. I don't feel like going to work. I don't feel like going to church." I don't feel like, you fill in the blank. If you choose faith, you don't always make your decision based on how you feel, because we don't always feel like doing what God wants us to do. Yet, God gives us the option. We see this lesson of free-will played out many times in the Bible, even in the stories involving Jesus. Jesus always gave people the choice to follow him or to do their own thing.

Faith is not only a choice, but also a commitment. Ruth made a commitment to Naomi when she told Naomi that she would go where Naomi goes, make Naomi's people her people, make Naomi's God her God, die and be buried where Naomi dies and is buried. Her commitment was unconditional.

The commitment Ruth made is similar to the commitment a person makes to become a Christian. We unconditionally give ourselves to God. We rely on and trust God, so much so that we are willing to step out in faith to take a risk for God.

And finally, faith is an adventure. Ruth had no idea exactly what she was getting into by committing herself to Naomi and to going to Bethlehem with Naomi. The same is true when we make the choice to have faith in God and to make a commitment to follow Christ. We are not told up front what we are getting ourselves into by following Christ. We are not told what risks God is going to ask us to take. We just put our faith in God. Faith is an exciting adventure.

We find in today's story, Ruth's decision to take a risk, to step out in faith—faith that I don't think she totally understood but led to having plenty of food for her and Naomi. And, later in the story, it leads her to a

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marriage to a distant relative of Naomi's, Boaz. And from that marriage continues the lineage that eventually God uses to send Jesus into our world. Yes, Jesus is a descendant of this risk-taking Moabite woman, Ruth. Ruth had no idea when she began her journey with Naomi that all of these blessings would come upon her.

I can only imagine the risks you have taken throughout your lives already, because of your choice to have faith in a God, that you cannot see or hear in the way that most people feel they need to see or hear God. The faithful risks you have taken in the past will have an impact on lives yet to come. You may never know, as Ruth did not know, how your choice to have faith and take risks will make a difference for generations to come.

But the opportunity for stepping out in faith, taking risks, is never really over. God is not yet finished with you; God is not yet finished with us at HCOB. Remember that. We may not find ourselves individually challenged to take, what I feel is a huge risk, to go to some foreign poverty war-stricken country to build homes, or as a congregation, to build a huge community handicap-friendly playground like my home church at Lititz did, but we are challenged to step out in faith to take risks in our personal every-day lives, and in our corporate lives in this community.

So, the questions remain: Are you willing, and are we willing to continue making the choice to have faith in God, to make a commitment of faith to God, and continue the great and exciting faith-based adventure into the unknown? I am, and I hope you are too. Amen.