

"It's You I Like"
Ruth 1:6-17
August 4, 2024
Rev. Leigh Curl-Dove

Last week, I got to spend a very brief amount of time with my best friend from undergrad. We had planned more time together, but flight difficulties made it so we only had about 24-hours together before I had to be at a conference. But we made the most with the time that we had. There is something special about spending time with the people who know you best. My friend, Sydney and I met twelve years ago in a dorm laundry room at Baylor University. And we have seen a lot of life together since then.

Our friendship flourished freshman year over a shared love of an afternoon nap. We instituted what we called "extreme naptime." One of us would go to the other's dorm room, lay on their roommate's bed, we'd turn on a movie or a show, and would both promptly go to sleep and sleep for multiple hours. When I was sick with a sinus infection, bronchitis, and ear infection that burst my ear drum, Syd went to the store and brought me Gatorade and chicken noodle soup. Then she sat as far away from me as she could, with a sleeve over her mouth and nose, to watch reality tv with me so I could have some human contact. When we needed to meet our PE credits, we took Beginning Golf together and instead of going to class, usually ended up getting breakfast together.

I was with her six years ago when she got the email telling her she had gotten a fellowship with the National Institute for Health, and would be moving to Washington D.C., where she still lives and works now. She was there when I called her to tell her about a guy I was dating, and even though it was early, I knew I was going to marry him. And then she was there to stand with me when I did in fact marry Keith two and a half years later. Early last year when visiting Syd in DC, I was waiting to hear if the search committee wanted to fly me out for an interview, and she said, "You're going to get this job, Leigh. I can feel it."

We've seen each other through twelve years of life—moments where we were at our highest highs, our lowest lows, and everything in between. Through it all what has kept us connected is the people we are, not the jobs we have, the places we live, but who we are on the inside that makes us uniquely us. Or as Mister Rogers sings,

"It's you I like,
It's not the things you wear,
It's not the way you do your hair
But it's you I like
The way you are right now,
The way down deep inside you
Not the things that hide you,
Not your toys
They're just beside you.
But it's you I like."

When we meet Naomi and her daughters-in-law, they are in the lowest low of life. Naomi is living in a foreign land, and her husband and sons (Ruth and Orpah's husbands) have died. In a time where a woman's livelihood and survival was tied to a husband or male relative, these women's very lives were in question. Naomi with no other option decides to leave Moab and go home to Judah. She releases her daughters-in-law from any type of responsibility to her. They both resist and say "No! We will return with you to your people." But, Naomi tells them "No."

She has nothing to offer them. She is too old to marry again. Even if she could marry, she cannot bear more sons for Ruth and Orpah to marry. Naomi has lost everything she held dear. Naomi is so beaten down by life in this moment that she wants to change her name to Mara which means "bitter." With nothing left, Naomi is certain that God has turned their back on her.

After the women weep together, lamenting their circumstances, grieving the life they've lost, Orpah agrees to go back to her mother's home to build a new life, but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. Ruth clings to her and will not let Naomi leave without her.

Ruth delivers some of the most beautiful and profound words of friendship. Though many couples use these words as wedding vows, these words from Ruth to Naomi are a commitment of deep friendship.

"Do not press me to leave you,
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,
And there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!"

Womanist biblical scholar Renita Weems says this, "Ruth's commitment to Naomi was not out of some morbid attachment to the dead. Five times in her pledge, Ruth repeated the pronoun 'you,' each time emphasizing her commitment to Naomi. It was not her dead husband's memory to which Ruth clung, but rather the good friendship with Naomi which she did not want to lose. Ruth was not interested in what Naomi's womb could or could not offer. Her pledge was to Naomi, the woman. It was Naomi whom Ruth had grown to love and care for."¹

Ruth was not interested in what Naomi had or didn't have. Ruth was not interested in what Naomi could offer her in the moment or even eventually. Ruth cared about Naomi the human being in front of her, at her lowest moment of life, and Ruth said, "Where you go, I will go."

¹ Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 28.

Naomi believes she has nothing left in her life. Naomi probably isn't even sure if her life is worth living anymore. She has conceded to living out her days in misery and bitterness. She even wants to change her name to "bitter." Naomi is certain God has turned away from her, but Ruth says, "Where you go, I will go."

If you don't know by now, I am a huge women's basketball fan. My mother fostered this love in me from a young age, taking me to University of Memphis women's basketball games frequently. When I was in high school, the NCAA women's regionals were played in Memphis and I got to see one of the greatest to ever play the game play—Brittney Griner or BG as she's come to be known. At 6'9" there is not much that stops BG from getting to the net, and there is not much that gets past her. BG and I overlapped for one year at Baylor. She used to ride her skateboard around campus to get to class and I remember her whizzing past me on the sidewalk. I went to every game I could my freshman year to cheer on the Lady Bears and to watch BG play. BG was the number one overall WNBA draft pick in 2013 going to the Phoenix Mercury. She has played every season since with the Mercury, except for the 2022 season.

On February 17, 2022, BG was traveling to Russia after a break to play for a Russian Premier league basketball team there, many WNBA players have to play overseas in the off-season because their pay is so low and they can make much more overseas. BG was detained and arrested on drug smuggling charges by Russian customs because she had forgotten there were two cartridges of medically prescribed cannabis oil in her carry-on luggage. These cartridges had .7 grams total of cannabis oil, an amount that had the cartridges been lit would have burned up almost instantly. After 293 days in Russian prisons and eventually a penal colony, BG was released on December 8, 2022 in a prisoner exchange.

BG recently wrote a book about her arrest and imprisonment. She writes about the multi-layers of it—her race, her sexuality, geopolitics, and more. As a Black, lesbian woman who is often mistaken for a man, BG knows full-well that her arrest was not just about a couple cannabis cartridges she forgot in hidden pockets of her carry-on.

Her time detained in Russia, was the lowest low of her life. She was not sure she would ever get to go home again, see her wife again, see her parents again. She did not have much hope. She was depressed. But, her community here in the US worked tirelessly to bring her home and the friends she made in detention and eventually the penal colony saved her. I found myself tearing up when she had to say goodbye to her friend Alena when she was sentenced to the penal colony.

In her acknowledgements BG writes to Alena, "I survived detention with the help of friends. Alena, you kept me sane through my low moments, even as you were dealing with yours. Thank you for making sure I didn't fall into deep depression, or at least that I didn't stay there. And more than that, thank you for giving me a sense of home when I was thousands of miles from mine...I wish you well and hope to see you on the other side when you're free."²

² Brittney Griner, *Coming Home*, 289.

Like Naomi, BG was at her lowest low, and like Naomi, had moments where she wondered if God had forsaken her. But, for both women, their friendships reveal the presence of God and who God is.

In the passage we read from John's Gospel this morning, Jesus calls his disciples his friends. Jesus is our friend. God is our friend. It's an image we don't often think of. When we think of God, it is often in the form of some distant, cosmic other-worldly being, or maybe loving parent, or royalty, a shepherd, which are all perfectly fine and good images for God, but God is also our friend, which changes and deepens our relationship with God.

Our friends show us who God is and how God loves and cares for us. Friends make us laugh, the kind of laugh from deep down in your belly. Friends believe the good for you when you can't believe it for yourself. Friends show up with Gatorade and soup when you're sick, and cake and champagne when you're celebrating. Friends say, "well, I never liked them anyway," when someone breaks your heart. Friends are excited to see you when you walk in the door. Friends hold your hand and put their arm around you when someone you love dies. Friends cry with you when you cry and laugh with you when you laugh. Friends are steady. You may not see them every day or talk to them every day, but they are there. They're your friend simply because you are uniquely you.

God is our friend. Who, even when we try to push God away or when we aren't being a very good friend back, says, "No! Where you go, I will go. You are stuck with me and there is nothing you can do about it. I will be here with you because we are friends. It's you I like."