



HOLLYWOOD
United Methodist Church
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CROSSFLIX SERIES – “WINTER’S BONE”

August 7, 2011

Sermon by Rev. Kathy Cooper-Ledesma, Senior Pastor

Scripture: Ruth 1

As we enter the second half of our Crossflix sermon series this morning, we leave the light and heartwarming films of the past few weeks – *Toy Story 3*, *Easy A* – and take a most definite turn towards hard reality – that in Hollywood we consider drama, but in other parts of the country, folks experience as daily life.

Winter's Bone is one of the most difficult films I've watched in some time. How many of you have seen it? I say that not because of its ending, but know that by necessity I will be spoiling it for you. But the suspense at the end isn't what troubled me so much. It's the knowledge that too many families – in the Ozarks, and elsewhere -- live in the desperate poverty that is depicted in the film; too many men and women see “cooking” – and I don't mean food -- as their only available industry to support their families; and too many children grow up without knowing they could have options.

The protagonist of the film, Ree Dolly, is a 17 year old who doesn't see any other options for her life. Her father is out on bail and on the lam; her mom has had a nervous breakdown and relies on Ree to take care of her and Ree's little brother and sister. All they have, really, is their house, their land, and whatever they receive from the kindness of strangers. And a determination to be family together.

Our Scripture reading for the morning tells the story of Ruth, a young woman equally bound and determined to protect her family. The story of Ruth actually begins with Naomi, who along with her husband and two sons were facing hunger and poverty. A famine had spread through Bethlehem, so they moved to Moab to find work and food. While there, Naomi's sons each married a Moabite, or Gentile woman.

Not long after the weddings, Naomi's husband and both of her sons died. Here were three women, all three widows, without resources or prospects. Naomi decided there was only one thing to do; she would return to Judah and hope she could find a place to live among her relatives. But she knew her family wouldn't accept these Moabite women, even if they were her daughters-in law. So she told Orpah and Ruth to stay in Moab and return to their parents. They were under no obligation to remain with her; indeed, she had no other sons for them to marry. Besides, they were young and could find new husbands in short order.

Orpah decided to follow Naomi's advice, and went back to her parents. Now notice there was no condemnation or judgment of Orpah for making this choice; it was the right choice for her. But Ruth chose differently. The scriptures say she clung to Naomi, and offered what are some of the most poetic words of love and fidelity every recorded:

*Where you go, I will go,
And where you dwell I will dwell;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God my God.*

Ree was also concerned about keeping her family together, so she walked all over the back woods asking folks – most all of whom were extended family -- if they had seen her dad. But other than her dad's brother, Teardrop, she mostly deals with other women – women who serve as the gatekeepers to protect their men and their code of silence. It's as though it's an open secret what happened to Jessup, Ree's dad – no one trusts Ree with that knowledge. When Ree continues to search for the truth in the person of Thump Milton – the mob boss of the Ozarks, we'll say -- even though she's been warned not to – the women gatekeepers decide she must be stopped. But when they finally listen to Ree – really listen to what she's trying to do – you begin to see a change of heart in Merab, portrayed by the great Dale Dickey who is joining us for our talkback after worship today. I'll warn you that this next clip has some violence.

In spite of the physical assault she suffered, and the continual dead ends she was faced with, Ree would not be deterred from finding a way to take care of her family.

That same strength of character was exhibited by Ruth. When she and Naomi returned to Bethlehem, it was Ruth who decided that she should go into the fields to glean so that she could provide food for the two of them. It was Ruth who decided that she would seek to marry Boaz – oh, Naomi played matchmaker, sort of; but Ruth decided on Boaz because marrying him provided her family with the opportunity to not only be economically secure but to marry the most moral and ethical person of the community.

A few years back an essay about Ruth noted: *for a life to be morally well-lived, one must search for meaningful experiences and actions that permit and demand growth.*¹

That is what Ruth did. In spite of the desperate circumstances of her life, she rose above all that which would drag her down. She chose to live a life of service and kindness to others. She chose to trust God and have faith in God's plan for her life, instead of her own plans. Ruth didn't HAVE to stay with Naomi; but she CHOSE to do so because it was the RIGHT THING TO DO.

Likewise Ree chose to do the right thing: to take care of her family even though in her heart of hearts she desperately wanted to find a way out, to start a new life in the military. She could have lied about her age and signed up with a recruiter; she could have left her mom to be taken care of by her uncle and aunt; she could have allowed her brother to be adopted by the next door neighbors; she could have joined in the drug culture that pervaded the community. But she did none of those things. Instead she, perhaps guided by an inner sense of the holy, Ree searched for meaningful experiences and actions that demanded growth. By everyone around her. Some were unobtainable, such as when she heartbreakingly clung to her mom and asked for her help. All Ree wanted was fairness and justice in a world where those are relative

and sometimes unobtainable terms. And when she was asked to do something unspeakable in order to prove her father's death so the bond on the house would be released, she did what was needed so that her family would be protected. Eventually justice prevailed, although not the sort of justice offered by the sheriff.

At one point in the film, and as one pastor put it: *with [an] introspective wisdom far beyond her years, Ree tells her little brother and sister, "I'd be lost without the weight of you two on my back."*²

Brothers and sisters, that's the definition of unconditional love, isn't it? – amen? To be lost without the weight of one another on our back? That's what loving God and loving each other is all about – understanding that it is only when we carry one another will we be focused in the right direction – in God's direction. Without words, and with her actions, Ree, like Ruth, young ones both, demonstrates that unselfish love of God in Jesus Christ, the love that empowers living a life that elevates others over one's own self; the family, the community over one's individual worries.

I want to share a story of another young one who has demonstrated such unconditional love in his own way.

For the past 5 years we've prayed for Tyler Cordova, shown here with his little cousin Sadie Grace, daughter of Dorian Traube and Steve Hong. When Tyler was 4 he was diagnosed with non-hodgkin's lymphoma and we added him to our prayer list. He went through chemo and radiation and we became buds at Dorian and Steve's wedding when he decided that I shouldn't walk out after the wedding ceremony alone; he was going to walk out with me.

Two years ago Tyler received a bone marrow transplant, and his body began to reject it last summer. Tyler was pretty sick, and he spent months at City of Hope. Last summer I brought Tyler a Celtics jersey from one of my trips to Boston, which much to my dismay he loved, and put on right away, rejecting the thought of a Lakers jersey even though I would lobby for them at every visit. I never won.

But I did enjoy the way Tyler would order his meals. Sometimes from the hospital cafeteria. But mostly from his Aunt Dori. He knew exactly what he wanted her to bring him from Pantera, or any number of other restaurants. He really exhibited an appreciation for fine cuisine.

Come to find out that Tyler spent much of his time recovering by watching the Food Network channel. Some of the folks around the hospital found out, and hooked him up with some famous chefs, including Eric Greenspan at Foundry on Melrose – here's Tyler with Eric in his kitchen.

Fast forward to today: Tyler just last week celebrated his 9th birthday, and is cancer-free. Amen? But that's not all. Tyler hasn't just enjoyed watching the Food Network and meeting celebrity chefs. He has a passion for cooking and has created his own cookbook of 75 original recipes, entitled *Savoring Life* to raise funds for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's "Light The Night" Campaign. You too can be part of Team Tyler – we have Tyler's cookbooks available for purchase for only \$10 today in the breezeway following worship. And if you ask very nicely, I bet the author would autograph your copy, because he is here with us today. Hey Tyler – will you stand up and wave so we can say hi to you?

Here's the lesson for us as a congregation today: we thought our relationship with Tyler was one way. We thought we were carrying him in prayer. Period. But Tyler has been carrying US, teaching us not only how to pray for one another, but how to overcome whatever difficulties life gives us – lymphoma, growing up in the Ozarks, living in a foreign land – and say to one another – I wouldn't be the same without carrying you on our back. Tyler has long been my hero, and I hope he, along with Ree and Ruth, becomes yours, too. Because he embodies the statement *for a life to be morally well-lived, one must search for meaningful experiences and actions that permit and demand growth.*

And because it is the depth of our relationships – with God and with each other – that gives us the power to bring forth change to our broken and hurting world. As we come now to gather around the table of Jesus Christ, who came to earth desiring a relationship with each of us, may we be renewed and rededicated to following him and being family with each other, saying to one another --

*Where you go, I will go,
And where you dwell I will dwell;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God my God.*

Amen.

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¹ Mira Morgenstern, "Ruth and the Sense of Self: Midrash and Difference," *Judaism, Spring 1999*, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0411/is_2_48/ai_64564812

² Roger Joslin, sermon preached at All Saints Episcopal Church, Bentonville, AR, December 26, 2010, http://www.allsaintsbentonville.org/index.php?/sermons/sermon/first_sunday_after_christmas2/