

# What's Your Story?

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Ruth 1:1-18

August 2, 2009

(Ordinary time, Yr. B)

**Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.**

That's what Willie Jones said when he stood at the altar of the Methodist Church in a place called Little Lynn, West Virginia. Which is a suburb of *East Lynn*. And *East Lynn*, according to some people is a suburb of ... well, it isn't heaven. *Believe me*. But that's what he said -- Willie Jones, I mean ... when he stood there before God and the preacher and everyone else in that end of the county. He looked into the eyes of the young woman who stood by his side and said, **Where you go I will go**. But not like that, mind you. He said it in the King's English, which made it sound even *more serious*, I think. He said, **Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God**. And when a Baptist person, like Willie, says something in King James they mean it. You can count on it. They do.

But if Pearl Stanley could have seen Willie's hand -- the one behind his back -- at that moment, I think she might have noticed that his fingers were crossed! Because it didn't happen. He didn't *goest* wherever she went. Not even to church, mind you! Because he was a Wayne County, bible-toting, washed-in-the-blood, born-again Baptist. Baptized by full immersion in Twelvepole Creek, mind you -- whose cleansing waters are second only to the River Jordan itself. And Pearl was a Methodist. A sprinkler, Willie called them. One of those peculiar types that went in for infant baptism and bishops and paying their preachers, for heaven's sake!

(Once when they were courting, Willie said, “Now Pearl, you don’t really believe in infant baptism, do you?” To which my grandmother said, “Believe it! Why, Willie, I’ve actually seen it!”)

And besides all of that, she was a democrat. And he was a republican -- one of the few in Wayne County. And he had been known to have a little nip of something every now and then. (For medicinal purposes, of course. Which included headaches, hangnails, and dandruff, I think.) But Pearl was a T-totaler.

And yet, Cupid drew back his bow and shot his arrow straight through their hearts. And Willie and Pearl fell in love. *With each other!* And the truth is Willie would have done *anything* Pearl. He would have walked the desert sands, swum the seven seas, climbed the highest mountain... Anything! You name it! He would even go with her to the Methodist church, the one there in Little Lynn! A church named for her grandmother, Lucinda Gilkerson. “I’ll be there with bells on,” he said. And he did. No kidding! Willie Jones went to a Methodist Church. Even sat on the front row so he could be near her when she played the organ. And he was there every time they opened the doors...

Some people said it was a miracle. If Pearl can do *that*, they said, maybe she can make a Democrat out of him, too. But... miracles are one thing... *and that* would be something *else* they said. Because only God can open the eyes of the blind. Something about Pharisees and Republicans, they said.

And then came the wedding day ... And Willie stood there in the Methodist Church and looked into the eyes of the young woman who had captured his heart. And he quoted those words from the holy scriptures. **Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.** And the preacher said,

“Willie, will you have this woman to be your wedded wife? to live together in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health; and forsaking all others keep only to her so long as you both shall live? And Willie said, “Yes sir, I will.” And then the preacher turned to Pearl Stanley and asked her if she would take Willie -- William Edward Jones -- to be her wedded husband. And she said, “I will.” And they made their vows before God and the preacher and everyone else who was there in the church -- their families and friends and all of their neighbors.

And the preacher pronounced them husband and wife -- two people who couldn't have had less in common if they tried. And he said, “Willie, you may kiss the bride.” And he did. Right there in front of everybody! And the organ played. And Pearl and Willie turned and walked back up the aisle and through the front doors of the Lucinda Gilkerson Methodist Episcopal Church. And that was it. That was the last time my grandfather ever set foot in that church. Because he was a bible-toting, washed-in-the-blood, born-again Baptist -- fully immersed in Twelvepole Creek. And my grandmother was a Methodist and every bit as stubborn as him.

But they loved each other. And in spite of all their differences, they stayed together through thick and thin. Made their home there in Little Lynn, West Virginia and raised ten children together -- five boys and five girls. And I think it all had something to do with what they saw when they looked at each other. For Pearl saw something in Willie that was kind and good and even Christlike, I think. Something honest and true. And she saw a man who was patient and peace-loving -- a man who treated her (who treated everyone) with gentle warmth and respect.

And Willie saw something in Pearl that was loving and good. Something uncommon. Something extraordinary, I think. And it had

something to do with her faith in God and her faithfulness to her family and friends. She was tender-hearted and strong, all at the same time. And she always tried to see the good in other people, instead of the bad. She was, he said, the most Christlike woman he had ever known. And that, to him, was something he couldn't let go of. It was something worth holding on to ... for the rest of his life. ✕

**But let me ask you this morning, what is that people notice about you? When they take a good look at your life, what do they see?**

**Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.** ✕

You used to hear that at weddings. Sometimes you still do, I guess. Someone may read it from the bible. Or maybe they sing it as the bride and groom light the unity candle or kneel at the altar.... And it makes sense, I think, that they do, because it is so full of love and faith.

But the funny thing is ... those words were spoken the very first time not by a groom to his bride on their wedding day. But they were spoken by a young woman to her mother-in-law. She said, **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. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me ...** to her mother-in-law!

But you know the story. Things were dried up in Israel. (In more ways than one!) The rivers ran dry ... and the wells and the ditches. And the crops failed. And the goats and the sheep and the cattle grew weaker and weaker as the days went by. But it wasn't just the livestock that suffered. The people did, too. They were sick and starving. Especially the

ones who lived off the land -- the shepherds and farmers and all of their families.

It was so bad in Bethlehem, mind you, that some of them left there for good. A man named Elimelech did that. He and his wife, Naomi, took their two boys and said goodbye to their neighbors, and moved to a place called Moab. Which was not heaven, *either*. Not even close. Because people didn't worship God there. They worshiped idols -- gods they made up -- statues and things that *they* had created in their own image. But Elimelech took his family there because *they* had food.

And it was okay for a while. But then something happened and Elimelech died. Which left Naomi there in this strange land with two boys to raise. And she did. She raised them up right. Two fine young men named Mahlon and Kilion. And when the time was right, Cupid did his thing and the young men were smitten. And they both married local girls. Not good Jewish girls, mind you. But Moabites. Peculiar people. With strange beliefs and phony gods. But ... they were in love.

And then something terrible happened. It doesn't say what, really. It just says that both of them died. Mahlon and Kilion. So poor Naomi lost her whole family. Which meant she was on her own ... without anyone to care for her. And, mind you, they didn't have anything *like* retirement funds, or social security, or government programs for widows and orphans. They didn't even have Meals-on-Wheels back in those days. So Naomi had nothing. Nothing at all. Except Orpah and Ruth, her daughters-in-law. And now they were widows, too.

So Naomi did the only thing she *could* do, I think. She decided to go home. To Bethlehem, mind you. Because things were better now. The crops were growing. And the sheep and the goats and the cattle were

strong. And there was plenty of food. And besides ... it was home. Her people were there. God's people were there. It was where she belonged.

So she started for home. And Ruth and Orpah started to go with her. But Naomi said, "No. This is your home. Your people are here. Your mothers, your family," she said. "And your gods are here. This is where you belong." And Naomi thanked them and gave them her blessing. But they wouldn't hear of it. They loved her. They cared. "We're coming with you," they said. And Naomi pleaded with them. "No. You can't. You were so good to my sons. And you've been good to me. But please ... I can't give you anymore husbands. I can't raise up more sons for you to marry. And even if I could ... you couldn't just wait for them. This is where you belong. This is your home." And they wept. Ruth and Orpah both broke down and cried.

And Orpah hugged Naomi and kissed her goodbye. And she did what Naomi begged her to do and went home to her mother and to all of her people. But Ruth was stubborn. She was determined to stay with mother-in-law. And Naomi begged her to go home ... like Orpah, her sister-in-law. And this young Moabite woman who came from a different world, with different ways, and different beliefs, and different gods looked at her mother-in-law and said, **"Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home! Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I'll die ... so help me God -- not even death itself is going to come between us!"**

And when Naomi saw how determined Ruth was, she gave in. And they made the long journey to Bethlehem. And Ruth the Moabite married Naomi's cousin Boaz. And they had a son named Obed who had a son named Jesse. And Jesse had a son named David. And if you read the first

chapter of Matthew you'll see something strange and wonderful there. It's the name of Ruth, the daughter-in-law of Naomi, the great-great-great grandmother of Jesus our Lord. ✠

All of that says something about Ruth, you know. It says she was faithful and strong and loving and good. It says she cared for Naomi with all of her heart. And she was willing to leave her own family, her own world behind to care for mother-in-law. But ... it says something about Naomi, too. For when Ruth looked at her she saw something in her that was worth holding on to. Something she needed and wanted in her life. She saw a woman who still believed after all she had been through and all she had lost. She saw a woman of courage a woman of faith. And somehow, I think, Ruth caught a glimpse of God, the one true God, through her mother-in-law. And that made a difference. It was something she was determined to hold on to ... no matter what.

**What do people see in you? Your neighbors -- your friends -- the people you work with -- the people at school ... when they take a good look at your life, what do they see?**

Fifteen hundred years ago, St. Benedict wrote a little book for his followers. "A Little Book of Instruction," he called it. And it's a guide for following Jesus -- for being a disciple of Jesus our Lord. And in it he says, **Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else.... Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away from someone who needs your love ....** Do this, he says, and it will make a difference. Not just for you ... but for the people around you. Your neighbors, your friends, the people you live with and work with and even the strangers who come in and out of your life every day. Let the love of Christ come first. Let it be so much in your life that it shapes your heart and soul, your character and

your conduct. And others will catch a glimpse of the God who loves them. The God who cares. The God whose deepest desire is to be with them and in them, at home in their hearts and at home in their lives.

So do that. Live the good news. Or as Paul said, live a life that becomes the gospel -- a life that let's God shine through every day. Because that's how God works... that's how he touches our lives. It's how his love spreads -- from one life to another. From one human heart to another.

But let me tell you one more little story to show you what I mean. A woman who was very bright and gifted made a decision one day. She decided to volunteer some of her time as a Sunday School teacher for a group of young girls in the inner-city. And one Sunday morning she asked the girls, who were dirty and poor and (somewhat neglected) to do something a little different. She asked them to go home, find something beautiful, and bring it with them to Sunday School the next Sunday.

And they did. They all came back the next Sunday with the beautiful things they found in their homes. Some came with flowers. And some came with dolls. Some brought pictures from old newspapers and magazines they had at home. But one little girl, who happened to live in the poorest part of the city, said, "I didn't find anything beautiful where I live ... except for the sunlight on my baby sister's hair."

Several years later the woman who gave her time as the Sunday School teacher passed away. And her husband was speaking at one of the well-known universities out west. And after the lecture, a distinguished woman (a professor there at the university) walked up to him. And she told him that she had once been a member of his wife's Sunday School class. And she said, "You know, I remember she asked us all to go home and find something beautiful. And I couldn't find anything.

The place was dirty and ugly. But then I looked at my little sister and the sunlight was shining on her hair. And that's what I told your wife the next Sunday. I told her about my baby sister. That was a turning point in my life," she said. "From that moment on I tried to look for something beautiful in every person I met." And she smiled and said, "I been doing it ever since."

Many years ago a young woman looked at a group of young girls who were poor and hopeless and she saw something more and she let them see something more in her. Something holy and loving and good. And because she did, they were able to see something more in themselves -- some God-like beauty hidden inside. And now they are able to see it in others.

What do you see? What do you let others see in you?

Let them see love and patience, gentleness and joy, peace and kindness, a generous heart and a faithful spirit. Better yet ... let them see Jesus living in you. And it will make a difference. Jesus will be born anew in their hearts and lives.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

**Soli Deo Gloria**  
Benen, ObLSB



