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Grace UCC, Lancaster, PA
Celebration of 10 Years of ONA

Scripture text: Ruth 1

Good morning. It is an honor to speak on this wonderful, wonderful day—the 10 year anniversary of Grace's public announcement that it would fully welcome lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons into its full life and ministry. I feel like one of those family members who's been away for a while who gets invited back to speak for the big party.

I do think of this as a big anniversary party. You know, one of those happy days when a crowd gathers to celebrate a couple who has been together for a long time or a family recalls that special day, long ago, when a child was adopted. One of those days that call us to stop and remind that we are witness to something truly precious: the fruits of people's willingness to expand the circle of their love and create family with those who were once strangers.

This anniversary at Grace deserves that kind of attention. That kind of party. We need to celebrate that Grace was the first congregation in Lancaster County to adopt the UCC's Open and Affirming designation. And that wasn't a photo-finish first place; in 2004, no other UCC congregation here was even talking about ONA. We can celebrate that since then, 3 other Lancaster congregations have since joined us, although we would have even more to celebrate if all UCC congregations were ONA, if all faith traditions were affirming, and if we lived in a religious environment in which it never occurred to anyone to exclude LGBT folks. But that's not the world we live in, so this public proclamation still matters. For a full decade Grace has not only said loud and proud that it is ONA but also lived up to its title.

II

Anniversaries are times for celebrating but also for remembering. Like couples who each anniversary rehearse the stories of when they met and what they thought about each other when they met and when they knew that they would be better together than apart, it's important for Grace to remember the steps that led to the decision the congregation made in 2004.

There are many ways to tell Grace's ONA story. The way that I remember it goes something like this:

In fall of 2002, at the encouragement of Pastor Jayne Hubbard, our seminarian intern David Stiffler preached in this space. He told his story of being Christian and gay and why being affirmed for who he was mattered so very much. David's story moved many people and generated lots of conversations.

Those conversations found their way to church council, which in Jan 2003 agreed that the congregation should start the ONA study process and appointed a committee to organize the conversations.

For over a year, the congregation studied and reflected and talked about all a whole range of issues--sexuality, the Bible, inclusion, the nature of family, and more. Folks stayed after worship for community forums, where we learned from invited speakers and each other. There were some tense and difficult conversations. And a lot of fears.

- There were fears that the talking about controversial topics would generate conflict in the congregation.
- Fears that we might lose members.

- Fears that the demographics of the church would change and long-time members would lose what they loved about Grace.
- Fears that with this change the church wouldn't thrive.

Throughout the process, no one knew what the outcome of our discussions would be. But people had the courage to act and speak anyway. They were willing to take risks and talk about things that we didn't really know how to talk about. It was a messy and imperfect process, as any process is that involves real human beings.

As it turns out, some of what people feared actually happened.

- There was conflict.
- We did lose members
- The demographics of the congregation have changed.

Yet it also turns out that the conflict and the departures didn't kill us. They did not mark the death of the congregation but instead gave it new life. Being ONA has given Grace a sense of mission and purpose and brought new people into community. Despite the fears, Grace is alive and well and celebrating.

This anniversary is a time to give thanks not only the outcome of the vote but also all that made the outcome possible. The acts of courage and determination undertaken when the congregation didn't know whether there would be a vote, what the results of a vote would be, or what would happen after the vote.

III

Our Scripture passage for today is another story in which imperfect people acted without knowing where the story would lead.

If you know the book of Ruth, you probably know its ending: by the time the story ends, Ruth has become the wife of a wealthy Israelite named Boaz and borne a son; Naomi's rights to her family's land have been restored; and Ruth and Boaz's son has been identified as the great-grandfather of King David.

But the book's beginning, which we read today, doesn't even hint at what will transpire by the end. Throughout the book, people respond to the circumstances facing them without knowing how the larger plot will unfold. Elimelech doesn't immigrate to Moab to start a royal line but to find food. When all the men die, Naomi returns to Bethlehem not for Ruth's sake but for her own; in fact, she tries to send both daughters-in-law away when they try to join her. When Ruth insists on staying by Naomi's side, she doesn't say it's so that she can get into a genealogy.

Exactly why she does stay is never named. One of the most interesting things to me about this story (and so many stories in the Old Testament) is that it doesn't tell us Ruth's motives. In a world of famine, death, and emptiness, why would one woman choose to accompany another on a journey to a place in which she will be a stranger?

- did she feel sorry for Naomi and want to take care of her?
- did she act out of deep love, seeing Naomi as family or perhaps as partner?
- had she come to worship Naomi's God?

- did she have a lack of options back home?
- was she seeking adventure?

The storyteller apparently doesn't think Ruth's motives are particularly important. In this tale, what drives the plot is not what Ruth thinks or feels but what she does.

And what other people do. Lots of people have to act in particular ways for the story to end the way it does.

- Boaz has to take an interest in Ruth (even if we don't know what his motives are, either)
- Naomi has to be willing to work with Ruth (even if we don't know why)
- The person first in line to redeem Naomi's land has to decline his right.
- The townspeople have to see Ruth's worth and accept her into the community.

In the book, the actions of so many people are necessary for the ending to materialize. At every step of the way things could have turned out otherwise.

And where is God in this process? It's worth noting that at no point in this book does God tell anyone what to do. Naomi and Boaz talk about God, but the story doesn't say that God spoke to them directly or make them do particular things. In fact, in this book only two actions of God are mentioned: God ended the famine in Bethlehem at the beginning of the story and allows Ruth to conceive at the end of the story. In the book of Ruth, God gives life but people's choices shape the outcome.

IV

I keep talking about the end of the story of Ruth, but in truth it's hard to say where this story ends. The genealogy that ends the book points forward to the birth of King David 3 generations later. And another genealogy, the one that begins the gospel of Matthew, names Ruth and Boaz as ancestors of Jesus. Their names join with a whole host of others in a family tree spans 42 generations. Jesus' birth was the fruit of not only of Ruth's decision to accompany Naomi, and all the thousands and thousands of actions taken by obscure figures whose names we struggle to pronounce: Jehoshaphat and Jechoniah and Salathiel and Eliakim.

And yet the story does not stop there. As Christians, we believe that Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and teaching continues to bear fruit in our own lives. And we believe that Jesus' gifts will continue into the generations beyond us. We trust in that hope.

This important anniversary should not only draw our attention to the present and the past but also invite us to think about our future. What we want to do and be in the next 10 years?

How will Grace's past choice to become ONA continue to bear fruit in the future? What is the next step on that journey of inclusion? How will this circle of love expand further? Who else now a stranger will become family?

And what other actions will we take in to face the realities and the human needs that face us?

If our own past is any indication, we don't have to be paralyzed by fear. Hard conversations may indeed surface conflict, but conflict doesn't have to kill us. We might instead thrive because of them.

If the book of Ruth is any indication, then we don't have to wait to act until we are assured of the outcome or of the purity of anybody's motives. And even when we don't hear God telling us exactly what to do, we don't have to worry that God is absent from the process.

In the book of Ruth, God brings life to those who took courageous steps. It is our prayer that God might bring life to us as well, life that will continue throughout the generations, in ways so wonderful that we cannot yet imagine them.

So today, let's celebrate. And let's find the courage to do what we need to do, trusting in God's care and grace.