This is our third week in a series of sermons about people of faith in the Hebrew Bible. Two weeks ago, the Prophet Nathan introduced us to David, a flawed person, but nevertheless, a person of faith. The name, David, means "Beloved." Last week we met Hannah, a woman of such faith, that she gives her son Samuel to be raised at the temple to serve the Lord. The name, Hannah, means "Favor," or "Grace." And today we meet Ruth. Her name means "My Cup Runneth Over." Some sources translate her name as "Friend." There is mutuality in the name, "Friend," and a sense of shared grace.

I like Ruth's name, "My Cup Runneth Over." Ruth is so full of grace and newfound faith, that she overflows with love!

I wish I had the name "My Cup Runneth Over." You may know someone named Ruth, or Grace. My name, Heather, is a Scottish flower, like in the musical "Brigadoon": "Heather on the Hill." But Heather is a scratchy bush, not very lovely at all. Why couldn't I be Rose? Iris, Jasmine, or Violet? (I guess Heather is better than Hyacinth or Magnolia…but it's not nearly as charming as "My Cup Runneth Over."

Ruth's cup "runs over" with love for Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, and for Naomi's God. Listen to this favorite story.

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Ruth 1:1-22 adapted from the New Revised Standard Version

There was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem by the name of Elimelech took his wife, Naomi, and two sons and went to live in the country of Moab. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They settled in Moab, but Elimelech died, and Naomi was left a widow with her two sons.

These sons took Moabite wives. The name of one was Orpah, and the name of the other was Ruth. When the family had lived in Moab for ten years, both sons died, so Naomi was left without her husband and without her sons.

Naomi started to return to Bethlehem for she had heard that God had considered her people and given them food. So she set out from Moab with her two daughters-in-law, on their way back to Judah. But Naomi stopped and said to her daughters-in-law: “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security. Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. But they said to her, they would go back with Naomi to her people. But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more
bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the L ORD has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.

Naomi said to Ruth, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return with your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said,

Ruth: “Do not press me to leave you
   or 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—
   there will I be buried.
May the L ORD do thus and so to me,
   and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

Narrator: When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them,

“Call me no longer Naomi,
   call me Mara,
   for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
I went away full,
   but the L ORD has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
   when the L ORD has dealt harshly with me,
   and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?”

So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

The story starts with a famine in Bethlehem, and it ends with "the beginning of the barley harvest." Naomi leaves her home in Judah and goes to a land of many gods. There her husband and two sons die, and Ruth, her daughter-in-law, insists that she will stay by Naomi's side: "Do not press me to leave you or 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" (1:16).

Ruth earned her name by making herself available as a chalice of God's grace: "My Cup Runneth Over." She is a cup of blessing to Naomi. But Naomi's name at this later point in the story is
Mara, which means "Bitter." Two women on the road, "Bitter" and "My Cup Runneth Over;" there's a real juxtaposition: one with cup empty and one with cup full. Both women have an unknown future. Without men to support them, they are powerless. Naomi is desperate enough to go back to Bethlehem and see if her kinsfolk can offer the women gleanings from the harvest. (The name Bethlehem means "House of Bread.") But Ruth, a Moabite, will be a foreigner in Bethlehem. Despite her alien status, though, she faces the future with her cup full, even running over! She is filled with God's love—it's a newfound faith, which she has learned from her mother-in-law. And by this faith, she dares to leave her home country and start a whole new life.

Last week a person in our congregation told me she came to church, even though she wasn't feeling well, because she needed to be with other people after the terrorist attacks in Paris and Lebanon.

I remember a time when my family was away at Christmas, and we came back to town and learned at our church that a married couple had separated, and another woman had committed suicide. We had missed the memorial service. Other people in the congregation needed closure too, and so the Stephen Ministers offered a time to meet and just talk. I went because I was overcome with sadness, and I remember saying, with eyes brimming with tears, that I needed to be with people who could believe that a new day will dawn, and that there is still hope.

By faith we meet today, convinced that there is grace overflowing for every situation. Like Ruth and Naomi, we are stronger when we are together. By faith we gather together here, knowing that in community we can face anything. By faith, we gather together, affirming that a woman from Moab—today's Jordan—and a woman from Judah—today's Israel—can be friends. Our differences need not make us enemies.

By faith, many of you came to this country. Everything was different when you came—the language, the customs, the church and worship practices…. But you have trusted that though change is hard, you have enough faith, enough of God's grace, to be courageous and make the adjustments necessary for a new life, like Ruth.

By faith, some of you have been caregiver for a loved one, sacrificing months or years of your own life. You could have chosen another path, but you knew that God would sustain you, and so you choose to serve by faith. (And you know your loved one would do the same for you.) "Where you go, I will go."

By faith, you have welcomed a new person into your family or a new family into our church. Though at first you weren't sure, now you are sure. Because you stand on the shoulders of people like Ruth, whose "cup runneth over," you have more than enough love and grace to accept people into your life, even people who come from another background or life experience.

By faith, you walked into this sanctuary the first time, unsure about what you would find. You were alone, new to town, perhaps without family or friends, or maybe without a job. But you knew you could be brave enough, with God's help, to find your way into this faith community. And now you are experiencing life in this church and becoming one who offers to others a testimony of your faith.
By faith, you have come to church today, even though you have been suffering from depression or anxiety, and sometimes, honestly, you don't know if you will make it. You will, though, because you have faith in God and in love, as evidenced in this community.

By faith, you have found yourself drawn to helping others, and so you will give this Thanksgiving Sunday, to help with refugee relief efforts. You could have chosen to do something for yourself with your Thanksgiving offering, but you have chosen to do something for people who are on the road, like Naomi and Ruth, hoping to find a new home.

By faith, you have come back to church after losing a loved one, as Naomi comes back to Bethlehem without a husband and without her two sons. Your emotions are a little raw, and tears are close to the surface. But you stand on the shoulders of many who know that it's perfectly okay to cry in church, that this is the very place where it is acceptable to be real, to be hurt, to be broken. This is the very place where we fill our cup at the well of living water, and God's love is overflowing. This is home. The harvest is plenty. Welcome home.

May your cup "run over" with joy and thanksgiving.