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The Face of God: In Love that Transcends Boundaries

A sermon given by
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On Sunday, November 1, 2009

Picture this: You're all sitting around the dinner table, everyone in the sanctuary. It's a big table! We're all sitting around the dinner table together. The table is about to get a little bigger now, because we're also going to invite everybody from the Bible to dinner. All the characters in all the stories, all the authors of all the texts, all the people who told the stories around campfires whose names we'll never know—all of those people are there, too. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael, Jesus and Paul, Moses is there. We're all sitting around the dinner table together. There's wine and there's bread. Does it feel crowded yet? It does? Take a little scoot back because we're going to invite some more people to the table. We're going to invite everybody who's a saint in this congregation, everybody who founded Plymouth, everybody whose names we read just now and remembered with candles and bells. All those people are here, too. You can picture it. Richard Cordley is over here, and Naomi is sitting next to him and they're chatting about something. It'd be an interesting conversation to overhear. If you're sitting close by them maybe you can hear; I can't hear, but it sounds like they like each other.

This is the image that I want you to hold in mind today, because it's All Saints' Day. It's All Saints' Day when we invite all, all, all the saints back to the table to communion together and remember again that we are all one in the body of Christ, and the body of Christ is eternal. All that have gone before us are still here with us and they join with us when we break the bread and share the cup.

Now, if you're a newby in Protestantland—I know we have a couple of people who are newbies in Protestantland—just a clarification. When we use the word “saint,” we actually just mean all of our mothers and fathers in faith. And sometimes, if we're feeling really good about ourselves, we call ourselves saints too. So here we are, all the saints of Plymouth Church sitting together. It doesn't require a miracle. We don't have to create some kind of strange miracle. You're all saints. So on All Saints' Day we gather around the communion table and celebrate the Peace of Christ with all the saints.

Okay, it's a little bit freaky to think about all these people coming back from beyond the grave, and if you find that idea a little unsettling, you're not alone. A lot of people have also found that kind of unsettling through times, and that's why we have a tradition of Halloween. Halloween is actually an old English word for All Hallows' Eve, or All Saints' Eve. So when everyone was imagining all the saints coming back again from beyond the grave to the table, the idea that there were ghosts—spirits—among us was kind of unsettling, so people did what was only natural. They began to dress up as ghosts as well, because that's a natural response to being scared of ghosts in someone's book. I think people are kind of weird, but that's where we get Halloween.

Anyway, keep your courage. This morning we're going to be visited by a couple of saints, Naomi and Ruth. They're truly mothers in the faith.

Ruth was Naomi's daughter-in-law. She was a foreigner, a Moabite. Both of their husbands had died and they found themselves at a crossroad, literally and figuratively. Naomi decided to return home to Judah and Ruth had to decide; would she go with Naomi back to Judah or would she stay in Moab? And she chose to go with Naomi. Naomi told her to go home, but Ruth refused. Ruth told Naomi that she would follow her home to Judah and that Naomi's people would be her people from that day on. The bond forged between these two women standing at the crossroads became one of the most important stories of our faith.

Ruth took a gigantic risk. In those days, the only safe allegiance for a woman was with a man of property. You can see that in all Naomi's talk about, "Where is your husband going to come from? You've got to have a man." This is a big risk. She risks following her heart to make her home with Naomi in Judah even though she'd never been there before. She'd be adrift in a new culture, a new language, a new religion. They would both be poor and they would both be vulnerable. But they would not be alone.

When Ruth risked linking her life with Naomi's she risked the disorientation and the vulnerability of a new life among new people because she found she could not live without Naomi. Do you know what it feels like to join a new people? To be a stranger in a new community where you only know one or two people? I'll bet a lot of us do. A lot of us are newcomers even here at Plymouth, having that "new people" sense of excitement and risk, but also feeling like you might have just left the bar at Cheers and now you're in a place where no one knows your name. Or they're taking sneaky peaks at your nametag.

I'll let you in on a secret. In a church about this size it's absolutely normal for not everybody to know everybody, even people who've been here a long time already. Sometimes older members think, "Oh, boy! I don't really recognize that person but they may have been a member here for 50 years and I don't want to embarrass them by asking for their name." So sometimes there's tension. But, again, it's normal.

There's research that shows how people naturally flock in a tribe of about 150 to 200 people. So if you're a Facebook person, it's like saying that most people have about 150 to 200 Facebook friends. We naturally get close to a certain number of people and that's pretty much where we feel comfortable. Reaching out to new people is harder after that point. Here at Plymouth, I'd say that Peter and Kay are probably the only ones who actually know everyone's name, and Peter's not all that good with names. Sometimes he might even call you something way out in left field—I've heard him do it. Don't be alarmed; it's not personal, he's really trying. It's just that there are so darned many of us! We can't leave it for a staff to know all about everyone and take care of all of them.

As people called by God to join together in communion and in faith, we each have a responsibility to one another and especially to the newest members of our congregation, our young people. Consider this: this year alone we've welcomed over 70 new members, the majority of whom are under 40. What a gift and what a

challenge for all of us to step out in faith, to build the relationships that will truly make us the body of Christ.

Ruth's story is our story too. Plymouth is full of spiritual foreigners seeking a home, seeking a place to set down roots and to share the practices of faith. And like so many family stories, Ruth's story lives on today here at Plymouth, especially on All Saints' Day. You might well find yourself sharing a pew with Ruth or Naomi. Or maybe you are Ruth. Maybe you are Naomi.

Monica is definitely one of our Ruths. She grew up in a Southern Baptist Church and her entire family is strongly identified with that tradition. From an early age Monica attended church regularly. She learned to read her Bible literally, and to place her faith in a God of clearcut, black and white rules. Everyone approved of Monica so long as she expressed her faith within the tight boundaries of behavior and language established by her church.

Things became difficult for everyone when Monica began to grow in ways that didn't fit those boundaries. Monica believed that God loved her, but she also knew that God hated homosexuality. Her church always made that clear. Even so, Monica fell in love with a woman named Keeley and it felt like coming home to her. She knew deep down that her love for Keeley was part of the same love that God shares with all creation. And so Monica stepped out in faith to make a new family with Keeley. She risked losing the approval of family and friends. She stepped outside the only relationship she'd known how to have with God. She stopped following the rules set by the Southern Baptist Convention, and she said to Keeley, "Your people will be my people from this day on."

Now, not too long before Monica and Keeley fell in love, Plymouth Church stepped out in faith and opened its doors to affirm love between people of the same gender. Our Open and Affirming statement was a risk. We knew that some people wouldn't like it. We knew that some people would be embarrassed. But we also knew that people like Monica and Keeley were wandering in a spiritual wilderness, feeling alone and outside the circle of God's love and we stepped out in faith to welcome them home. When Monica walked through our doors for the first time, she felt God's love. She'd never known that faith could be about love and grace that transcend boundaries rather than rules and judgement. When Monica met Plymouth Church, she spoke to us in Ruth's voice. She said "Your people will be my people, your God will be my God."

You remember all the saints, all our mothers and fathers in faith, we can know they are still with us just as Ruth is present with us in Monica's story. Now, if you look carefully around the sanctuary this morning, you will also see Naomi. She is here in all the older men and women who built this congregation, carried out its programs, served on its boards and shepherded generations of children through its Sunday School.

Naomi is living on in June Preston. June's been a member here since 1950's. She and her husband, Floyd (a resident heathen), welcomed me and Ben to Plymouth right from the start. They're wonderful people with amazing stories and generous hearts. I really recognized Naomi in June when she invited me to the Women's Fall Assembly at Camp White. She gave me Naomi's answer to Ruth, "My people will be your people from this day on."

Camp White is our church camp. It's just north of Council Grove and it's a beautiful place. If you haven't been there, you have to go. Surrounded on three sides by lakes, in the camp are winding hiking trails cut through native grasses and wildflowers, and the stars at camp are incredible. The drive down is breathtaking. Every fall women from UCC congregations all over Kansas and Oklahoma gather together for a weekend at camp. This has been going for decades, but it wasn't until she invited me along that I realized these women even existed. First time I'd even been to camp! June made that possible. June became Naomi when she invited me to the women's retreat. She took a risk in reaching out to me, a newcomer and a young person. She invited me to join her in something she enjoys and helped make sure I got there.

Take a look around the sanctuary this morning, you'll see a lot of older members like June and Floyd. Take a look. Can you see Naomi? Can you hear her answering Ruth, promising her a welcome into the fold of her community? She's saying, "My people will be your people from this day on."

We have something special here. An opportunity to live into our family story. The world around us is full of alienation and isolation. We spend so little time with our children now that most young families depend on two incomes. We work more hours than ever before, leaving less time than in previous generations to visit extended family and connect with neighbors. Grandparents fly in for weekend visits instead of stopping by for Sunday dinner. Our older generations are carrying their independent spirits into later years, living independently at home or in assistant living communities rather than moving in with adult children. It is an awesome gift to be in good health long enough to live independently.

All of us miss out on the kind of intergenerational connections that used to be commonplace. The truth is, we need one another. We need one another to become a whole people if we are to live into our call to be the body of Christ. We young people need the older generation's perspective to help balance out our anxiety as career starters and new parents. I know this is true for me. (There's no baby coming, not yet. We'll let you know.) But career starting is hard and it's scary and you need to have some perspective sometimes, so it's really important for me to have those connections with June and the older folks that can help me to get some perspective.

At the same time, I have a feeling that the older generations could use a little stirring up and a little help. The freshness of young people's idealism keeps our traditions strong and keeps our church growing into new life. And frankly, some of our older leaders are just tired. They need our help to carry on the traditions of our faith.

Sharing leadership in the life of the church is not always easy, though. Especially when you've got very used to the way things have always been. It's easy to bank anxiety about change in the congregation and about growing older by gripping the reins of control too tightly. Think about that, too.

In her book, "Tribal Church", Presbyterian minister Carol Howard Merritt reflects on the richness of intergenerational congregations. She writes this on sharing leadership: "In 2003 the glowing Lauren Hutton graces the cover of AARP's magazine with the headline, 'Sixty is the New Thirty.' While grandmothers used to do a little light dusting

in their twilight years, now grandmothers are far away from the dust as they take up biking and hiking and mountain climbing or continue in the workplace. When a leader exceeds her retirement age in the workplace, she has tremendous energy and it has been a wonderful gift for the church to have retired people in leadership positions. They have taken up the duties that young women can no longer do since they've entered the workforce. Most people who hold on to positions of power do it because they do not see anyone who can take their place, and surely our churches would not function without the wisdom and life of older generations. But if sixty is the new thirty, have we left any room in our churches for the actual thirty-year-olds? Certainly we have not allowed much denominational power to rest in their able hands. If we want to have younger generations in our pews, then we can begin by receiving them in our pulpits, and on our boards, and committees, by asking them to take up leadership positions and by sharing power with them."

Plymouth may congratulate itself on calling Josh and licensing Shannon Gorres to lead our third service. In these concrete ways, we lift up young leaders and demonstrate the value we place on new ideas and new ways of being together in faith. And at the same time—here's the kicker—ensure that the story of Plymouth Church and the story of Christ with us continue to unfold for generations to come. The torch is passed. Just as Monica spoke in Ruth's voice and as June spoke to me in Naomi's so do we all speak in the words and stories handed down to us by our mothers and fathers in faith. The conversation continues. The cloud of witnesses to God's love keeps on in our own lives. We see Ruth's and Naomi's in our midst. We hear Monica speaking Ruth's words and we hear June speaking Naomi's. We are gathered here with the saints of this congregation, sitting in their seats, and standing on the shoulders of their faith that Plymouth would be a voice of God's unlimited love.

When we share communion in a moment, we'll pass the cup and bread to one another in each pew and we'll say the words of institution over the elements. As we pass the elements, look to see whether there's an older person or a younger person nearby whose stories you don't yet know. Reach out and greet them. As you do, take some time and consider what it means to be a part of the intergenerational body of Christ at Plymouth.

If you haven't found a way to meet people of other generations in a meaningful way here, consider attending our Lenten Wednesday night dinner series and Plymouth Academy classes. Stop by the in-depth Bible study on Sunday morning before worship. Come to Theology on Tap, we welcome people who are young at heart if not in years. Get involved with a mission action team. Work on greening the church or shaping a faithful response to health care needs, or help us expand our practice of hospitality to welcome all people no matter where they are on life's journey. Come to Italian night and share fellowship over dinner. Take a culinary arts class or join the choir. Volunteer with LINK or Family Promise (our week is coming up—sign up, sign up). If you have small children we will work hard to make sure childcare is available.

There are many smaller tribes here at Plymouth and many ways to grow in faith as the body of Christ. Please, please don't ever feel that you have no choice but to be alone. Ruth and Naomi are here to welcome you, and so are all the rest of us. And our people will be your people. Amen.