

Sermon: Our Journey to the Heart of God - Pt. 2 (Ruth 1: 6-22)**Feb 27, 2016**

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Did you do your homework assignment for this week? Did you read the story Ruth? I hope so, because now is the time for the pop quiz. It just has one question, inspired by the story of Ruth. Are you ready? The question is: Where is God in your life?

For some of you, I imagine you know exactly how to answer that question. The synapses in your brain are firing and you already have twenty responses ready to share about how God's presence is active in your life. But others of us might struggle a bit with this question. We might even say "Before I can answer that, I need to know what you mean by the word 'God.'"

In many ways, it is a variation of the question "Where is God in your life?" that plagues Naomi at the beginning of the Ruth narrative. Though she is more likely asking "Why has God left me? Why has God allowed such tragedy and grief to entire my life?"

And to be certain: What has happened to Naomi is a tragedy. To lose one's sons and husband would be a terrible blow to anyone in any time or society, but in Naomi's culture it was particularly devastating because of the way women were treated in the ancient near east.

Recently I read an article in National Geographic about a tiny village in the jungles of India, along the Bangladesh border. This village of five hundred persons has a very unusual social order, particularly as compared to much of the rest of the world. It is a matrilineal society where kinship is traced not through the men but through the women.

In this society:

- the youngest daughter in the family inherits the wealth
- Women, not men, own most of the land and property
- husbands move into their wives' homes
- children take their mother's last name
- Girls are educated and, when ready, can marry whomever they choose or not all
- But not having any girl children can be a cause of distress for a family, as the family line can only be carried into the future by the females

This is almost the exact opposite of the situation faced by Ruth, Naomi and Orpha at the start of our story. They are living in a deeply patriarchal culture, centered around the rights and lineage of men.

It's important to note that the entire Bible, all of scripture, was written under just such a male-centric culture and as a result:

- women are rarely the main characters in biblical narratives.
- They are rarely named, rarely speak.
- And when they do, it is most often to talk to or about the male characters.

In contrast, what we have in today's text is the single longest conversation between two women in all of scripture, and the discussion isn't about the male characters-- it is about each other. This is so unusual that it has led some scholars to argue that the Ruth narrative was perhaps passed down not by a male writer, but by a guild of women storytellers. This would explain why the Story of Ruth, unlike most Hollywood movies today, passes the Bechdel Test.

The Bechdel Test, popularized by feminist American cartoonist Allison Bechdel to draw attention to gender inequality in the arts, simply asks whether a work of fiction features at least two female characters who talk to each other about something other than the males characters in the story. Would it surprise you learn that about half the films made in Hollywood each year fail this test?

So it should be somewhat surprising that this ancient story of Ruth (at least the part we are discussing today) passes the Bechdel test! Given the patriarchal culture from which it comes, this is significant. It is a story full of themes related to women: birth, widowhood, barrenness, single parenting, loss of a child. Here the female characters are not just part of the narrative, they ARE the narrative!

And what may have surprised some in that ancient male-centric culture was: Surprise! God can be found in a story about women. So take note. Whenever the writers of scripture bother to name female characters or include them in the narrative, they are telling us: "Pay attention. We do not mention them by chance. They have something important to tell you."

So why is it that the situation that Naomi finds herself in at the beginning of this female-centric narrative is such a predicament for her, Ruth, and Naomi? Because in this culture, a woman's role/status/honor was given to her by virtue of marriage and motherhood. With the death of her husband and sons, she has no role, no access to honor, no real status.

(Before we are too quick to judge our ancient forebears, we should consider if we don't see things much the same in our culture. How often, when a parent loses their only child, do we cease to see them as a parent, when nothing could be further from the truth. Or how often, when a person suddenly becomes a widow or widower, do we cease to see them as someone's spouse. Many persons in this room can attest that this simply is not so.)

So Naomi is left, as she sees it, without family. In a way, she is much like the biblical character of Job. He too loses everything, including his family, at the start of that story. He is much like Naomi -- with one crucial difference: As a man, the Job character still

has his maleness to bring him status. He still has many options open to him that would not be available to the Naomi character.

She is left (as she says in vs. 21) "empty" and as she sees it, with only one option: to return to her family home of Bethlehem. Any dreams for her future were tied to her husband and sons. She sees no choice except to retreat to her past.

So distraught about all this is Naomi that she even changes her name in our reading. From Naomi, which means "pleasantness" to Mara which means "bitter." And would we not be bitter too, facing what she is facing? Would we not also wonder why God had let our life become such a shambles?

It's worth noting that the names of Naomi's daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, also have symbolic meaning:

- Ruth's name = companion
- Orpah's name means "back of the neck"

And this pretty much sums up the narrative. Responding to Naomi's urging, Orpah chooses not to follow Ruth to Bethlehem, but returns back to Moab. The last we see of her in this story is, literally, the back of her neck.

But Ruth chooses to stay. To be a companion to Naomi.

Which makes little logical sense.

- It's not like Ruth has time to just hang around, waiting for Naomi to remarry, have sons, and have those sons grow up to marrying age.
- It makes little sense for Ruth to take the risk of going with Naomi to Bethlehem, a place where she is an outsider with no idea if she'll be welcome
- It would make much more sense for Ruth, like Orpah, to return home and find another husband.

And yet she stays. Why?

- Is it that she has no real family to return to?
- Does she feel closer to Ruth than her real blood relations?
- Is it simply love that bonds them together?

The reality is: Ruth is the least likely companion for Naomi. She is a pagan, a Moabite, an enemy of Naomi's people, the Israelites. She's a widow, with no husband to support her. She is a woman, with very little status. And yet, here is a God moment in the story: It is Ruth who chooses to stay with Naomi, to care for her, support her, love her in the difficult journey ahead.

What are we to make of this?

Often, the suggestion is that we are challenged to be like Ruth. But honestly, I don't think I want to take up that challenge. I don't know about you, but I don't think I'm up to it. I'm not sure, if push comes to shove, that I can love someone so steadfastly that I'd

be willing to give up my family, my whole life, just to journey with them into an uncertain future. Anyone up for challenge?

But what if the point of today's reading isn't that we are to be like Ruth... but rather we are to realize how often we are like Naomi -- where everything we hoped for in life turns out otherwise.

- I don't know about you, but I've had "Naomi" times in my life. Those times when you realize that nothing turned out the way you'd planned. That everything seems a shambles.
- Those times in our lives when we feel like we've lost so much, that we can't figure out why anybody would want anything to do with us. When we figure that being in relationship with us has to be more trouble than it's worth.
- Like Naomi basically telling Ruth: "Why would you want to be with me? I have nothing to offer? I've lost everything. You'd be better off pretending we'd never met and go on with your life without me. I'm not worth the kind of love you are offering me."

Naomi not only may think she is not worth loving, but she is convinced that love has left her...particularly God's love. She cries out: Don't call me Naomi (a name that means pleasantness) but rather call me Mara. Call me bitter. I went away full but the Lord has brought me back empty."

What floors me about this part of the story is that Naomi says all this with Ruth right there by her side. She is so caught up in defining herself by her struggles, that she fails to remember the one by her side, who has walked with her, companioned her, loved her in her distress. She is so focused on being alone and abandoned that she fails to see that she is neither. That love has been with her the whole time!

- That God's love never abandoned her. It's always been there.
- How often I wonder do we do this?

How often, I wonder, when life hasn't turned out as we planned, when we feel broken and alone and beat down, if we are paying attention, might we discover that God comes alongside us, like Ruth, and offers us love?

How often is God willing to companion with us on the journey, and all we are asked to do, like Naomi, is accept the offer of companionship? To accept that gift of love without trying to understand it or rationalize it or explain it.

As I heard someone put it the other day: "God loves you, and there's not a thing you can do about it."

How differently might we live our lives if we truly believed this? Who would be sitting in the seat beside you next Sunday if only they heard that message...that truth: That God walks with you, God loves you, & there's nothing you can do about it?

So here is this week's homework assignment: Share this message with someone in your life who, like Naomi, may think God has abandoned them, that God wants nothing to do with them, or perhaps that God was never there to begin with. You might just discover that in doing so, it not only changes their life, but changes yours too. Amen.