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Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, March 7, 2010

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

Love Story

Ruth 1:1-22

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

How are we to deal with loss? I will argue that loss is most effectively handled through a love story of shared suffering: the atoning death of Jesus, bearing one another's burdens and openly lamenting. As the writer of Hebrews proclaims, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God."¹ Jesus asked, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."² And Naomi said, "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life bitter."³

I've never been one to read romance novels, but recently I did. It was part of our *282 Journey Through the Old Testament* back in November. It's the Book of Ruth. And it's true. The romance happened at a real time and in a real place.

According to Ruth 1:1, the setting is the Promised Land during the period of the judges. According to Ruth 4:22 the setting is later, perhaps during the time of King David. However, regardless of a precise dating, the story of Ruth serves as a ray of light in a sea of darkness. It gives us a snapshot of an ordinary life that radiates with hope, because we see God at work in the course of common life; in the midst of ordinary people. Ruth is a great love story.

Because of famine in Judah, Elimelech moved to Moab with his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Kilion. Shortly after their arrival, Elimelech died. Mahlon and Kilion took wives, women of Moab (Orpah and Ruth). Then, Mahlon and Kilion died. The women survived.

We have important choices to make in the wake of loss. Gerald Sittser is a professor at Whitworth

¹Hebrews 9:14

²Mark 3:33, 35

College in Spokane, Washington. About fifteen years ago, his minivan was struck by a drunk driver. In a moment's time, he lost three generations. In the car with him were his mother, wife, and four year-old daughter. They were all killed. He later wrote a book called *A Grace Disguised*. In it he tells of his loss and experience of grief. He describes the initial experience of living with the loss in a very poignant way. He writes: "I felt like I was staring at the stump of a huge tree that had just been cut down in my backyard. That stump, which sat all alone, kept reminding me of the beloved tree I had lost. I could think of nothing but that tree. Every time I looked out the window, all I could see was that stump."⁴

Elimelech's decision to move left Naomi widowed, childless and without sons or grandsons to continue the family line. Naomi, which means "pleasant", was brought to the place where she renamed herself "bitterness." The turning point in Naomi's bitterness came when the LORD directly intervened in her circumstance. The love story of shared suffering unfolded in this way: First, Naomi heard that that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.⁵ Second, Naomi actively demonstrated bearing the burdens of her daughters-in-law. She told them that to go with her to Bethlehem would be to separate them from their cultural and family background. Orpah took leave of Naomi. Ruth clung to Naomi. And third, Naomi, upon her return to Bethlehem, openly lamented that the sorrow in her life was given to her by God.⁶ The love story that Naomi had with God was clearly one of shared suffering.

I know there are some of you here who, when you look out the window of your life, can only see that bare stump. Yet Sittser later writes he discovered that "the experience of loss does not need to be the defining moment of our life." Instead, he writes, "The defining moment can be our response to the loss." In other words, we do not have the freedom to choose the roles we must play in life, but we can choose how we are going to play the roles that we have been given.

How are we to deal with loss? God's Word tells us that we deal with loss through a love story of

³Ruth 1:20

⁴Gerald L. Sittser, *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 42.

⁵Ruth 1:6

shared suffering: the atoning death of Jesus, bearing one another's burdens and openly lamenting.

Naomi received word that the LORD had provided food in the land. The famine had caused Elimelech, Naomi and their sons to flee Bethlehem. But now, God made the way for famine to end and food to flourish. The larger context of the famine being relieved and Boaz's role in Ruth's life is messianic in nature; atoning in effect.

Naomi had a genuine concern for her daughters-in-law. She prayed for them: "May the Lord show kindness to you."⁷ That word *kindness* is a Hebrew word pregnant with great meaning. It's the word *hesed*. It speaks of God's loyal, steadfast and committed love for his people. Orpah returned to Moab. She did what was expected. Ruth did the unexpected and clung to Naomi like a two year-old clings to her mother's neck. Ruth's expression of loyal, faithful love to Naomi was demonstrated in the words, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God."⁸

If we're going to survive times of loss and tragedy, we have to learn how to receive God's loyalty and commitment to us, *hesed*, and how to have this kind of loyalty and commitment to each other, this kindness known as *hesed*. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we have to make a choice to cling to God and to one another. Naomi clung to God and Ruth clung to Naomi. In times of loss we need to extend ourselves to God and each other. The church of Jesus Christ ought to be a place where we demonstrate that it is possible to have relationships of great depth and commitment with God and one another.

Naomi and Ruth made the journey across the mountains to Bethlehem. Naomi had left with a full life; with a husband and two sons. She returned with a Moabite woman. Naomi was filled with lament. She responded with a bitter complaint. "Naomi" means pleasant. She said to the people of Bethlehem that her name didn't fit anymore. She asked to be called Mara (which means "bitter"). Naomi complained to God. She said, "The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me ... The Lord has brought me back empty."

⁶Ruth 1:20-21

⁷Ruth 1:8

⁸Ruth 1:16

She believed what happened to her was not random. She did not think, “Why me?” She thought, “Why not me?”

We often think God will be offended by our questions and complaints. But when you’re intimate with someone, it’s normal to express all your feelings, even if they are of betrayal. Our choice to face and lament the pain, as Naomi did, is a necessary component to experience the fullness of the love story.

People’s lives are fractured. Loss is common place. The love story is still true. In the midst of our losses, remember that the love story is one of shared suffering. Believe in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Bear one another’s burdens. And openly lament. Sometimes all we can see is the loss and all we can feel is the pain. But if we open our eyes, we can see God; we can see that loyal friend; and we can openly lament.

Loss is most effectively handled through a love story of shared suffering: the atoning death of Jesus, bearing one another’s burdens and openly lamenting. As the writer of Hebrews proclaims, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God.”⁹ Jesus asked, “Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”¹⁰ And Naomi said, “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life bitter.”¹¹

The most important choice we can make in difficult times is to believe that life is like the tangled threads on the back of a tapestry. It seems like an unrelated tangle with colors, loose ends and unraveled knots. It’s only when you turn the tapestry over and look at the other side that the exact same threads clearly paint a picture or display a pattern. It is the black thread that causes the lighter thread to stand out in greater distinction. In life, most of the time, we cannot see the other side. But faith in God’s Word assures us there is another side and that even in our loss and pain, God is at work for our good.

Being a follower of Jesus Christ is about a love story. As followers of Jesus Christ, we live the

⁹Hebrews 9:14

¹⁰Mark 3:33, 35

¹¹Ruth 1:20

love story. We share in his suffering; we bear one another's burdens; and we openly lament. God's unconditional love for his people is the thread that holds the love story together. What a great love story.

Never the Same: When The Word Changes You. Let us pray!

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