

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

¹ Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. ² Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do." ⁵ She said to her, "All that you tell me I will do."

¹³ So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷ The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

On this Sunday of remembrance, many of us find ourselves revisiting memories and grief related to a loved one who has died, those we remember here today, and those who died in our past, perhaps, many years ago. Not all of what we feel is welcome because it is painful, yet it is something we need to journey through. May we find comfort in knowing that God is with us on the journey.

Sometimes when we look back on our experiences with our loved ones, we see things that we did not see before, and we wish we had seen those things while our loved one was still alive. It may not be something that would have changed anything in our relationship with them, but it may have enhanced our appreciation for the person, and maybe we would have expressed that appreciation while they were still with us.

My dad died in March of 2018, and I catch myself looking back on some things through this kind of a lens. Something that would not seem all that significant to most people occurred when I was entering high school. It was then that I was given the opportunity to choose some of my classes in school. My dad insisted that I needed a typing class. He said I would always be able to use what I learned in that class no matter what I did with my life.

I didn't listen to his advice, and quite frankly, got impatient with his insistence that I take the class. All I knew was that I did not want to take a business track of education, and typing fell into that category at my school. The pressure I felt from him to take the class likely made me more determined not to take it.

I can't tell you how many times I look back now and wish I had listened. I type all the time as I prepare sermons, write letters and emails, etc. And although, as Don would tell you, I am a very fast typist with a few fingers, I know I would be even more efficient if I knew how to type. Dad was right. It makes me wish I had been more receptive to his advice on this and, perhaps, other matters as appropriate. I would like to tell him that he was right.

Today, our scripture reading takes us once again to the story of Ruth and Naomi. Last week we focused on faithfulness—the points being that having faith requires making the choice

to have it and not a feeling we experience; faith requires making a commitment to be faithful; and faith is an adventure, many times, into an unknown. Ruth found herself stepping into faith when her husband died and when she chose to stay with Naomi she decided to return to her homeland. As a Moabite, Ruth was taking a huge risk and making a sacrifice going to Bethlehem because as a Moabite, reviled by the Jews, her life could have been quite miserable.

The choice to take the risk to go to Bethlehem and begin anew would not have had to happen if Naomi's husband, Elimilech, had not died, and if of her sons, one of which Ruth was married to, had not died. Imagine the pain, frustration and even the anger that these women may have felt at experiencing so much loss.

With some study on the background of the story of Ruth, we learn that Naomi's name means, "beautiful grace of God." When Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem and Naomi is greeted by the town's people, we find that they ask in 1:19, "Can this be Naomi?" Naomi responds as we read in verse 20, "Don't call me Naomi, call me Mara," meaning "bitterness."

Naomi is bitter that she lost her husband, her sons, her support, her livelihood and her identity. Who could blame her for her bitterness after experiencing so great a loss? She was bitter towards God. She blamed him for bringing this all upon her. It is not unusual to experience bitterness towards God and to ask the question of why someone died. Often, we think this happens more often when someone young and/or someone seemingly healthy dies, or when someone suffers before they pass away; but my experience is that these feelings can be felt no matter the circumstances of one's passing.

You may remember the sermon I preached a few weeks ago from the story of Job. I said then that we don't always get the answers for why something happens. The same is true when we ask, "Why God?" when someone dies. We just don't always get the answers we are looking for from God; and His silence troubles us at those times. Bitterness can take over and further deepen our darkness and grief if we ignore it.

The scriptures teach us that we should pour out our bitterness and anger to God, not necessarily blaming God, but expressing honestly what we are feeling. There are expressions of bitterness and anger found in the Psalms. But even those cries of pain and anger offered by the psalmists, redirect the psalmist's attention to God's presence and help.

Openly sharing what we are honestly feeling with God are cries for help unless we choose to hold tightly to our pain and bitterness and refuse to bond with God, and the comfort and help he has to offer us. It can be hard to let go of those feelings. That's why it is a process, a journey, of returning to God over and over sometimes until we connect with all that God has to offer as comfort and healing.

We might wonder what Ruth was feeling. She too experienced great loss. Yet, she gave up more as she left her own family to travel with Naomi to a distant place where life, as should have been expected by her, would be even more difficult. I suspect she saw Naomi's bitterness and grief and the vulnerable position that Naomi was in without her family to care for her. Remember, when the story began, Naomi was the one in a foreign land.

Ruth put her own pain aside for the sake of Naomi. Her compassion and love for this older woman, her mother-in-law, was priceless. When our lives are rocked by the heaviness of the death of a loved one, we have each other. God gave us each other. God places the love and compassion within us to be there for each other. We don't need to be afraid of not knowing what to say or do to support each other. When our hearts are filled with the love of God, what is needed will flow through us. We will know what to do and say.

With God's wisdom and love in us, we will know that some of the typical things people might say as an attempt to help, really are not helpful at all. A comment like, "God must have needed your loved one in heaven," only adds to the confusion about why their loved one died. Why would God need their loved one's help in heaven? Isn't heaven the place of perfection and joy?

Telling people that they just need to let go of their grief and get over it isn't helpful either. Usually, this statement says more about our discomfort with their grieving process than their state of mind. Those who are grieving need to make the difficult journey through their grief. It is a process with no specific deadline, because we all grieve differently. If we see unhealthy signs such as talk of suicide or withdrawal from healthy connections, then we might suggest getting help from hospice or a counselor; however, we should never be insensitive to the healthy process of grieving by telling someone to just get over it and move on.

God will also help us to know when to be silent when a grieving person needs someone to just "be" with them. Just "being" brings God's presence into the darkness of one's pain. As I said, God gave us to be in relationship, to be there for each other with compassion and love always. We don't stop offering support and love after a week, two weeks, a month, or a year. We are there for each other always. We keep checking in with, supporting, and loving those left behind after a loss. Ruth shows us this kind of sacrificial love and support, even as she was making her own journey through grief.

We also learn from Naomi and Ruth's story, as it relates to grief, that God is faithful. We know that God promises eternal life for those who are faithful. But God is also faithful to those left behind. While we will never have the joy of being with our loved one again in this lifetime, God will walk with us, even carry us through our grief, and if we allow God to do so, God will show us the open doors for healing and new life.

As the story goes, Ruth went gleaning for grain left in fields by farmers after the harvest, as was required by law so the poor would have food to eat. Ruth found herself in a field owned by Boaz, one of Elimilech's relatives. Remember—Elimilech was Naomi's deceased husband. Boaz noticed Ruth and asked about her. He spoke with her.

Their exchange went like this as found in Ruth 2:8-1:

⁸ Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹ Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." ¹⁰ Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" ¹¹ But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹² May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!"

When Ruth returned home to Naomi, she told Naomi what transpired, and Naomi saw the crack of a door opening. She knew if the door was opened all the way, both she and Ruth would be taken care of for life. They would have a second chance at life. We read this morning the plan that Naomi advised Ruth to pursue. Ruth was obedient, went to the threshing floor where Boaz was sleeping, and laid at his feet.

Naomi's advice may sound strange and even seductive to us, but it was actually an act in accordance with Israelite custom and law. It was common for a servant to lie at the feet of his/her

master and even share part of the blanket covering the master. In doing this, Ruth was sending a message to Boaz that he could be her guardian-redeemer—that he could find someone to marry her, or he could marry her himself. This was family business not something romantic.

Boaz awakened to this and was moved to take action. Knowing he was a relative—even if not the closest relative to Elimelech—Boaz sought out a closer relative sitting at the city's gate. He informed the gentleman along with ten witnesses, and told the relative that Naomi had returned to Bethlehem and was planning to sell the piece of property Elimelech owned, and he was to have the first opportunity to purchase it. The man was interested until Boaz then mentioned Ruth and that she came with the property as a package deal. The man was not interested, passed on the offer, and told Boaz he could take it, which is exactly what Boaz did.

Naomi, with all of her bitterness, still was able to see a crack in the opening of a door, and went for it. She was blessed because Ruth and Boaz married and had a son. This meant that Naomi and Ruth would be taken care of for life. It is through this imperfect bloodline, this opening of a door, that the Savior of the world was born.

Making the journey through grief, even when the pain and bitterness seem too great to handle, is necessary to get to the other side of the darkness keeping us from living to the fullness of God's plan for us. It is invaluable that we are there for each other to help one another through our grief no matter how long it takes or how many sacrifices we need to make for each other. And it is necessary for us to make the journey through our grief as it enables us, in time, to recognize God pushing open a crack in the door and inviting us into something new.

On the other side of the river of our grief, as we look back and we may wish things were different, we will see at the same time God's presence with us, and with healing in our souls we may say, "Now I get it, God, you were there all the time. You are always faithful." Amen.