**SERMON Ruth 1:1-18**

INTRO

Isn’t it amazing how life can change so swiftly for us? The book of Ruth is often thought to be a sweet, tender story with a romantic ending. Ruth is a nice young woman who cares for her mother-in-law, finds a man, and lives happily ever after. But, the story is actually far more complex, and interesting, and relevant for today. One day, Ruth was home in Moab before being ‘taken’ by either Mahlon or Chilion. From that point her ‘life script,’ and Orpah’s for that matter, was torn to pieces. Then, when the men die 10 years later, again all that she would have known disappeared, and she was plunged into desperation along with her sister- and mother-in-law. We *never* know how life will move us along. We may plan and have goals and even hold winning strategies. But life is not fair. Life has its own set of rules. And like Ruth, *we* find that our options become limited and our choices few. Go back? Go forward? Stand still? There were not a lot of other options for Ruth, with *un*certainty both behind and ahead. And yet, the choices Ruth made, in this first chapter, determined her own, and Naomi’s destiny. The vows she’s makes –in the midst of crisis, grief and uncertainty– powerfully envision a different future for herself and her mother-in-law. Yes, her options were limited, but in Ruth’s words and actions we see the image of God in this story.

CONTEXT: SETTING

This story begins with a family in crises. Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their sons, Mahlon and Chilion left their home in Bethlehem because of a famine and moved to Moab, which –despite being a near neighbor, held quite different cultural norms. But in this crisis of famine, Moab had bread when Bethlehem (the house of bread) did not. After the move, Elimelech dies and soon his sons do as well, and the women were left alone at a time where there was no way for women to support themselves. They are left not just economically vulnerable, but bereft.

TROUBLE IN THE TEXT: GRIEF

Grief often feels like a part of you is stuck in a moment in time. That’s because grief demands to be felt. It crowds the heart, eats up all your energy and chronically imposes upon your peace. Grieving is the bodily, cognitive, emotional and spiritual means through which we humans deal with loss. Loss of a meaningful *something* or a meaningful *someone*. The most obvious source of grief is the loss of a spouse, a parent, child, sibling or friend. Many other losses though, can have a similar effect: Divorce, unemployment, illness, moving house, an empty nest, other life transitions, and yes, we are all experiencing a massive, collective grief as a result of COVID. Grief is the soul’s cry of protest over severed bonds and ruptured connections, all things that have been exacerbated during times of isolation and social distancing.

But too often we try to move grieving people too quickly through healing.

CONTEXT: NAOMI & RUTH

The story of Ruth and Naomi offers an inside look at grief and God's ability to redefine the meaning of family and community. While only a few verses mention the death of the father and two sons, there are thousands of unwritten pages of pain, emotion, and loss in the lives of Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah that we will never know. Not long ago, I came across a rewriting of Psalm 13, a Psalm of lament that begins with the cry: “How long?” In this rewriting, Rev. Julia Seymour reminds us that grief is not linear. She writes:

*The cycles of grief – denial, anger, bargaining, depression,*

*acceptance are idols.*

*They are mile markers on a highway. I am not traveling.*

*In my pain I am not on a clearly marked trail, but bushwhacking*

*through brush,*

*crossing unknown rivers, backtracking and circling to see the same*

*spaces again and again.*

*These alleged compass points meant to show progress in my journey,*

*are only useful if they are printed on a handkerchief;*

*then I wipe my face with them and see more clearly.*

*I call out and I hear a chorus of false friends with easy platitudes,*

*but they don't know this terrain.*

*Only when I glimpse the shadows of fellow travelers on*

*their own trails,*

*when I hear the birds and watch squirrels jump,*

*when the water is clean and clear and full of life.*

*Then I remember I am not alone.*

*Everything is still hard,*

*but I remember I am not alone.*

LINK

In the face of devastating loss, when it seems that everything is gone, it can be difficult to see who we’re left with, and what options lie before us. The path is rarely clear, and certainly not linear. Naomi thought she had lost everything. But she had Ruth, and through her presence…God had not abandoned her.

TROUBLE IN OUR DAY: GRIEF+

We have experienced a lot of death, grief, and loss in the midst of a global pandemic, racial brokenness, economic disparity, and political division. While it is fairly straightforward to recognize the responses of loved ones after a death as grief, many coronavirus-related losses are less tangible. Yet they are real losses nevertheless, and as such, they evoke grief: loss of the ability to gather, loss of physical presence with beloved family members and friends, loss of control over events affecting one’s children, loss of a sense of security and overall well-being. Such losses can be hard to pin down in their vague, intangible character. Grief in the time of COVID-19 is complicated by the many locations it can occupy within our lives, many of which involve losses for which there is no body to bury. And there often is no definitive sense of closure as the loss stretches on and on through time.

LINK

But, just as for Naomi, God has not abandoned us. Instead, through Ruth we see divine love, divine care, and compassion in action.

HOPE IN THE TEXT: RUTH

In Ruth we see the image of God. She shows *chesed*, a Hebrew word often attributed to God and sometimes translated *lovingkindness* or *steadfast love*, but really describes something more akin to *compassionate solidarity*. A bond of love that knows how to witness to a person’s suffering as well as be presence with them through it. Ruth shows *chesed* to Naomi, even when Naomi, in her bitterness, resists. Naomi’s (and Ruth’s) losses are very real, as real is the suffering it produces. But the bonds of love are not severed by loss. They remain. And when we can locate love in the midst of crisis, grief and uncertainty then we can be sure that God is present with us.

In a suffering world, where the choices before us seem limited, Ruth speak to us of possibilities. The vows she makes in vs.16-18 represent a “hinge” moment in the narrative, on which much of the rest of the story turns. They bear the unmistakable marks of a covenantal promise. Ruth’s comprehensive and unwavering impulse was to bind herself to Naomi’s fate. This is compassionate solidarity in its truest sense: Ruth identified her own life trajectory so completely with her mother-in-law’s that what was true for the latter was to be true for the former. And I would venture to say that both Naomi and Ruth experience the inbreaking of God through their relationship to one another.

LINK

I believe that the same can be true in our day, for us. Human relationships –particularly in the midst of grief, sorrow, and fear– can and do reflect divine care, and even the covenantal care of community. This kind of covenantal care envisions a community where all are fed, sheltered, comforted and seen. Where pain and suffering aren’t minimized or ignored; where joy is the dominant note; and with hope for a different future is not destroyed. Ruth’s vows to Naomi establish a covenant of care that is much bigger than just between two grieving women, they are a picture of community of *chesed,* a community that seeks to live out compassionate solidarity in tangible ways, especially at times of tangible (and intangible loss).

HOPE IN OUR DAY

Can you imagine a world in which we took spiritual oaths like the one we find in the book of Ruth? It’s sometimes difficult to find things to look forward to when the future seems so uncertain, but what if as a covenant community together we mirrored the *chesed,* the compassionate solidarity of God that Ruth demonstrated towards Naomi? What would our care and support to those who have lost loved ones look like? What would our prayer lives look like? Or our engagement in social justice in our city? How would our mission efforts to feed of the hungry, shelter those without homes, be impacted? How would we tend to each other’s needs? Would you be more gentle with your own anxiety, stress and exhaustion?

CLOSING

I hope you’ve heard the beautiful words of a song created just for this series, that JR has been singing each week as part of our Threshold Moment, that opening our time of worship. They’re printed in your bulletin, but let me read them again:

*We all come from the dusty earth and from the places of our birth*

*Ancestral stories, who we’ll be. We bring it all to “come and see”*

*We all have wounds that no one sees, oppression, trauma, and disease*

*When we bear witness to the pain it can begin to heal again*

*We all need people who will be with us in solidarity*

*No explanation, no defense, just ministry of their presence*

*Surprised by God’s unboundless love from many walks of life we come*

*To build a covenant of grace and in our differences embrace*

Ruth’s covenant of grace with Naomi, of *chesed* or compassionate solidarity didn’t deny or dismiss the hardship of all they had experienced together. Instead, it paints a picture, a vision of how human community can faithfully witness to grief and suffering, and still find hope and comfort together. This, it seems to me to be the message we each need to hear in 2021. For when we open ourselves up to see the presence of God visible in the faces of those we are in relationship with, we need not feel so alone, or so hopeless. There may be *un*certainty behind and ahead of us, but we do not go alone.