

Loss and Loyalty

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I look around this space this morning and am moved. Because I don't just see you but I see your stories for some of you have allowed me into your journey and more often than not your stories have been touched by loss. When death has left its mark on your heart. When your beloved has betrayed you. When you have hopes for a good job and can't find any work. When those that are dear to you suffer. When mental or physical illness change your family. You see my beloved I could not read this passage without remembering your loss and without witnessing your faithfulness. May God's word transform us this day.

The book of Ruth begins with one of the most emotional and painful passages in all of scripture. It reads:

"In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land; and Elimelech, a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons went to reside in the country of Moab... Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women....and then the two sons also died."

The Book of Ruth begins, in other words, in tragedy.

I was reminded of my long days as a chaplain in a community hospital out in N.J. where I met a man who told me how he wasn't religious. He had lost his only child to a ravaging disease and from then on "he and God didn't do much talking".

How do we pray let alone follow God when our hearts are broken? When the events of our lives have turned us upside down and God has done nothing to prevent it? How can we pray when we are angry with God? When the One in whom we've put our trust no longer seems trustworthy?

Three women are left with three dead husbands and no means of support. It is the kind of moment that leads these women—leads everyone, perhaps—to a different life. And it leads at least two of them to a new relationship with God and one another.

Moments of great loss throw a person back on internal resources, with little in the way of external resources to barter—money, social connections, education. At that point it is what we have inside ourselves at times of loss that will have to count. It is faith in God in life that is the only real resource we have to draw from at times like this. And it is what these women, then, are teaching all of us yet today.

Like everyone ever born who goes through sudden, defining loss of any kind, these women find themselves faced with the question: Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was? I know that many of you have asked that. Who am I now?

Loss, any kind of loss—rejection, abandonment, divorce, our health, death—is a shocking, numbing, grey thing that at the outset, at least, freezes the heart and slows the mind. Loss changes life at the root. Changes us forever. What was once the center of life—the person, the position, the plan, the title, the lifestyle—is no more. Life may never be the same again. What we have known, almost unconsciously, often for years, to be good—to be familiar, to be sure, to be certain—is gone, snatched away without warning. What we took for granted may shift and tilt and weaken. Emptiness can become our new

companion, God more a rumor than a fact. Even our spiritual certainties can fade a little: Where is God now when we are left in a sea of disorientation? Where is the will of God for us in loss?

There are spiritual lessons to be learned from loss that can barely be divined by any other means. We learn, just when we think we have nothing, that what we do still have is ourselves. We have, deep down inside us what no one can take away, what can never be lost either to time or to chance: we have the self that brought us to this point—and more. We have God waiting for us.

Loss, ironically enough, is the catalyst of newness, a doorway to other parts of the soul, where what lies dormant in us comes alive because without a capacity for the unexplored, life dies. You see, life is not one path; life is many paths, most of them unexplored in favor of closer, clearer ones. But when loss comes, our creating God comes again to us in new and difficult ways.

There is no moving on to new life until we have faced the loss of the past one. And that takes time. It takes time to deal with the anger that comes from loss. It takes time to regain perspective, and to see ourselves as separate from what we've lost. It takes time to see the hand of God in the depths of darkness. It is only when we have celebrated the gift of what we've lost that we are really ready to move on with life, to move beyond what has been to what can be, to let go.

Grief has a place in life. It can be a launching pad for possibility that legitimates questions we never thought we'd ask. We can ask what it is in us that lies unfinished and begging to be done if the will of God is ever to be completed in us.

Naomi did what we all must do, one way or another, at a time of loss. Naomi simply picked up and went back to Bethlehem, not so much to find refuge in a family that was not there, but to be what she herself needed to be at that time: a Hebrew, a Judean, an independent woman in the bosom of a culture she had lost years ago before its time. Naomi went back to become what else she was besides the wife of Elimelech, the mother of Mahlon and Chilion, the leftover piece as the Hebrew says, of someone else's life. She went back to become herself again. Naomi goes home. And beautiful, lovely Ruth goes with her. Ruth is loyal to her mother in law.

LOYALTY The Hebrew word here is *chesid*. *Chesid* encompasses reaching out to or helping those in need-by visiting the sick, comforting people in mourning, welcoming travelers or guests, providing appropriate burial for the dead, throwing a wedding, or giving charity. She stayed with the one who needed her, the one who took care of her...She provided for her and her action is remembered forever.

We as the church can learn from Ruth. Darryl Guder says it pointedly: "We are a people called forth to fulfill a divine purpose: to witness to God's love and mercy for all humanity.

Christian community is not a loose collection of individuals who gather occasionally to meet their self-determined needs. The church must explain and display the kingdom of heaven today, now, here. ...the church, like its Savior, must "embody," "enflesh," "incarnate" the good news that God's redemptive reign of peace, justice, and healing now extends to all the world through his Spirit and his body."

One question this part of the story puts to us is, Are we willing to be like Ruth? Naomi sets Ruth and Orpah free to go back to their households, back to their people, back to their land, back to a life full of wonderful possibilities. Orpah returns, but Ruth doesn't. And, I think at this point Ruth teaches us something important about the gospel. She shows us that the good news can sometimes make our life difficult—you know, sorta like Jesus' life. Ruth takes the low road, the unfamiliar path, the road less traveled. It's not the path with the guarantees of security and peace. Ruth chooses a path that risks her future for the sake of an old woman, her mother-in-law. And this is where Ruth shows us the way of the Kingdom: Jesus leads us to our death, to the cross. And at that moment when we can do nothing for ourselves, God receives us into a life beyond our imagination, the resurrected life.

We make ourselves available to God's new life when we give up the securities of life—all those things comfortable—and walk with the vulnerable, people like Naomi, into what seems like an uncertain future. And then we may come to realize that what is remarkable about the Christian life is that we believe that we live only by the grace of God—our future is not something we achieve, instead, it's something we receive while we walk along the path Jesus shows us.

"In the godforsaken, obscene quicksand of life, there is a deafening alleluia rising from the souls of those who weep, and of those who weep with those who weep. If you watch, you will see the hand of God putting the stars back in their skies one by one." Anne Weems

What Ruth gives Naomi is herself, her simple presence, and ultimately her body, her womb where she will bear a son, a descendant, for Naomi. In case you didn't know, Ruth is one of the few women the gospel of Matthew (the first chapter) names in the lineage that births Jesus, the Messiah of Israel. It's Ruth, a Moabite woman who seemingly has nothing to offer Naomi but her presence.

In Naomi we see that, if creation goes on creating in us all our lives, then loss can bring us all back to the transformation of ourselves just when it seems that there is nothing left in us to develop. The pain of loss lies in the fact that we so seldom realize the fullness of ourselves until the rest of life lies open in the ashes of the past. When loss finally happens as loss inevitably will, then we get the opportunity to say either yes or no to a different, transformative journey.

With Naomi, we take another road, not because we know what will happen at the end of it but because we cannot be whole without walking it.

With Ruth we learn loyalty and faithfulness. We commit ourselves to those that are vulnerable. This is risky. This is challenging. We are asked to let go of the things that keep us from being completely present with God and God's people.

What if we as the people of God risked this year? What if we worried less about fulfilling our needs and put others first? What if we gave more of our finances to God; work here at 1st Pres. so much more that it felt sacrificial? What if we committed to being present with those that are in need? Those that are vulnerable?

We will be in good company for we will be following the saints that went before us.

Amen