

Stronger Together

Ruth 1

1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. **2** The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. **3** But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. **4** These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, **5** both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. **7** So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. **8** But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." **9** The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. **10** They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." **11** But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? **12** Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, **13** would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." **14** Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

15 So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." **16** But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. **17** Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

¹⁹ So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" ²⁰ She said to them,

"Call me no longer Naomi,^[a] call me Mara,^[b] for the Almighty^[c] has dealt bitterly with me. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with^[d] me, and the Almighty^[e] has brought calamity upon me?"

²² So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Again this week, it is amazing to me the timing of our Scriptures. In our text today, we hear part of the story of a family in the middle of a crisis. There is national crisis affecting their well-being and suddenly, this crisis becomes personal. It hits closer to home with the deaths of three loved ones.

This crisis begins with a famine in the land. We are told that this particular family leaves their homeland to find resources to sustain their family. Almost immediately after the family is settled in this new land, the father dies and 10 years later, the sons die as well.

This wife, Naomi is now a widow. This mother, Naomi, is now without her children. She is all alone except for her two daughters in law. As we remember, during this time, widows are especially vulnerable. Without male relatives to take

care them, many widows found themselves without the means to take care of themselves.

From the very beginning of this passage, the author of Ruth is signaling to us as readers, that this is as bad as it gets for Naomi and her two daughters in law...First, a national crisis, then personal crisis, and now they are facing an uncertain future. This family's story is filled with loss and disappointment, grief and bitterness, pain and an overwhelming sense of instability. This family is facing so many uncertainties. It seems like they are left with no good choices. Every decision has no easy answers and only brings more worries for them.

I find it interesting that the author decides to name this family's struggles so plainly. There is no sugar-coating it. It is as bad as it can get for this family. They do not have support systems. There are no safety nets. No emergency funds. This family is left with choices which only bring more pain and loss.

Knowing all this, one daughter in law chooses to leave and another chooses to stay. Unfortunately, over the years, as people of faith, we have decided that one daughter in law made the right choice while the other one made the wrong choice. And this understanding is completely unfair, especially when there are no good choices offered for the daughters in law.

Naomi explains to them that she is not going to remarry and have more children, and even if she did, do they really want to wait that long. The tradition of Levirate marriage is out as an option for seeing to their well-being. Naomi is trying to get them to see at this point, the future facing them is dim and without possibilities.

Again, the author of Ruth is pushing us to see beyond narrowed down simplistic choices. In moments when grief overwhelms us, when the pain of loss is so great, it is not about right or wrong. It really is about making the best decisions we can with the information we have at the time. In times when there are no good answers to the hard decisions facing us, all we can do is to do the next right thing, whatever that looks like. For Orpah, it was returning to her family. For Ruth, it was journeying on with Naomi.

Each choice is the next right thing for the daughters in law because, although their choices led them along different journeys, each one of these daughter in laws acted out of love for one another. Each one acted out of the hope that their decision would bring healing and wholeness. Each one made the best decision she could with the information she had at the time, because each one of their choices was grounded in the act of reflecting and enacting divine love for one another.

Because ultimately, that is what we are called to do as people of faith...in all things, in all our decisions, in all our interactions with one another, we are called to reflect and enact divine love for one another. And this can and does take many different forms. From praying for one another, to walking alongside one another, to starting a different journey, as people of faith, all of it is grounded in our hope, in our understanding that what we do will bring healing and wholeness.

Which is what makes Ruth's words at the end of this chapter so remarkable. We tend to romanticize them, looking at them through rose colored glasses, often prettying them up so we can use them at wedding services. But in reality, these words are spoken in the worst of times, times when there are no easy answers, when there are no good choices. These words are spoken when grief and pain are overwhelming this family. Ruth speaks these words to Naomi, to let her know that she is not alone, that their grief has strengthened their connection, that although they come from different backgrounds, that although their life experiences were not the same, their journeys, their paths are now connected. They were brought together in the midst of this crisis and now, moving forward, to whatever life may hold for them, they are stronger together. They need each other to make it through these uncertain times which they are facing. Their differences in background, in age, in ethnicity, no longer matter. What matters now is that their journeys have brought them together and they need each other to survive. They are stronger

together moving forward, grounded in hope that whatever they do will bring healing and wholeness. They are stronger together, reflecting and enacting divine love towards one another as they make their way through these uncertain times. They are stronger together, as they embrace the ties which bind them together as one.

Or let me say it this way...I wish I had some wonderful story to illustrate how people are living out this whole stronger together idea but more often than not, the stories we are hearing on social media, in our news, in our community hold more division and separation, more judgement and condemnation. I was talking with a neighbor the other day and he shared how it seems like our time in quarantine has stripped away our ability to care for others. We can't or won't see each other as people, as humans, as Beloved Children of God.

Again, I'm not pretending to have all the answers because I will be the first to admit that it does feel like at this time of uncertainty, we really are left with no good choices, left with no easy answers. There is a national crisis which has become personal for so many of us. There is so much hurt. There is so much pain. There is so much grief. All of which we have not been able to process or name because things are changing so quickly. It feels like we cannot take five minutes to name our struggles, to name our grief, to name our pain because things are shifting so quickly.

Which is why I greatly appreciate the Spirit's reminder that, in moments like these, we can always come back to Ruth's words: "Don't urge me to abandon you, to turn back from following after you. Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. ¹⁷ Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you."

As people of faith, as a society, as a culture, Ruth's words remind us that our journeys are connected with one another. Our current reality has brought this Truth to the forefront more so than ever. We need each other to survive. We need each other to reflect and enact divine love for one another in all that we do and say. We need to see each other as people who are grieving, who are hurt, who are overwhelmed with loss and disappointment and come alongside each other on this journey.

Because this whole stronger together is not a catch phrase. It is not a slogan for a bumper sticker. It is not something we say to simply boost morale. Being stronger together, working from the hope that all our decisions and actions will be healing and wholeness, not just a select few but for all of God's people, these are the very elements of our faith. These are the very foundations of our faith. As ones who pray each and every Sunday that on Earth as it is Heaven here and now, we know that these are not simply words we say. These are the very things which

shape us and transform us into the people God created and calls us to be. These things are why we do what we do as Christians. We work towards unity. We hold the hope of community. We embrace the ties which bind us together so that the world will know that there is another way...another way to be, another way to interact with one another, another way to see each other, another way which calls us abundant life.

It is my prayer that all of us during this time when things are so uncertain, when it seems like there are no good answers, when each choice brings a new worry, it is my prayer that we hear these words from Ruth once more, that we invite them into hearts, that we allow them to shape us and transform our understanding of community so that we will begin to act in ways which reflect the hope, the promise, the very element of our faith, that your people will become my people, that your God will become my God, so that today and always we become stronger together as we make our way along this journey we call life. May it be so. Amen.