

Sermon – May 12, 2024

“Family Dynamics”

Ruth 1:1-18

A comedian once said that mothers rock the cradle, while mothers-in-law rock the boat! I would be willing to wager that we could divide the married ones present today into two kinds of people: those who adore their mother-in-law and those who don't or maybe - not so much. Agree with me or not, in-law relationships are tough – particularly mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships. According to a 2013 Huffington Post article, new research confirms that relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are really stressful. 89 mothers were asked about their greatest worries when their children married. Remember the saying: “A son is a son 'til he gets a wife, but a daughter is a daughter all her life?” Mothers overwhelmingly reported more uncertainty and insecurity when their sons marry than when their daughters do. The mothers in the survey reported worrying about their sons' well-being, and said they feared their sons wouldn't visit as often after marriage. They also felt concerned that their daughters-in-law would change their sons.

Today's text talks about a typical in-law relationship – the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. This book of the bible, Ruth, reads almost like a short love story, covering a full range of some of the rawest human emotions: grief, bitterness, humility, love, loyalty and redemption. All packed into 4 chapters and a total of 85 verses. The story of Ruth and Naomi is an affirmation of commitment between a daughter-in-law and a mother-in-law after a series of losses and challenges that devastated their family. In other words, the context of the book of Ruth is not the “best of times,” rather - the “worst of times”.

The story begins with famine, uprootedness, and death. Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, forcedly immigrated to Judah's enemy territory, Moab. They did this not because they were fleeing from war or from religious or political persecutions, but because there was famine in their homeland, Bethlehem, known as the “house of bread”. It is ironic that the "house of bread" does not have bread to feed the people. Taking risks, crossing boundaries, religion and culture, they have to step into Moab, an enemy territory, in order to

survive. Yet, irony strikes again – the enemy territory is the place where they found refuge and built a new home. Naomi probably longed for her sons to marry nice Jewish girls. Instead, they marry Orpah and Ruth, who were Moabites – foreigners, idol worshipers, different. Sounds familiar? For you married sons and daughters out there – you might have heard your parents say – marry someone who is like us – someone who will embrace our traditions – someone who has the same wealth and fame and status in life as us – someone who is a Christian or someone who knows how to cook like Mom!

Elimelech and Naomi accepted both Orpah and Ruth as their daughters-in-law. But within a short period of time, death pursues the three women. Elimelech and his two sons die, leaving three widows. Both Orpah and Ruth did not have children with their first husbands. And we know how widows were treated in those days. Widows face dangers or even death, because without husbands or sons or a significant male presence, the widows are left without support and no status in the community. It was a crossover moment in time for the 3 women. It is the kind of moment that leads these women to God's new time. For Naomi, it meant not only grieving the death of her husband, but also feeling the interminable loss of her sons. No parent expects to bury their children. Naomi's name, which means "pleasant" or "sweet" in Hebrew, is no longer the case. All she experienced was life's unpleasantness and blamed God for her fate. Later on she will change her name to Mara, which means "bitterness", to remember that God dealt bitterly with her. But grief seems to have strengthened what were already strong connections between these women, left alone together, who must find a way to meet their needs. Why else would there be such weeping?

The news that there was bread again in Bethlehem and could now provide food for its people must have been music to Naomi's ears. She decides to go home, taking her daughters-in-law with her. Having started the journey together, it must have taken Orpah and Ruth aback that Naomi attempted to persuade them to return to their own families. Having experienced what it means to be an outsider/refugee/immigrant in Moab, perhaps Naomi wants to spare Orpah and Ruth a similar experience in Judah, where they would receive minimal care, support and welcome. Naomi insisted that she return to Judah alone. She proceeds to spin out the law of

Levirate marriage, which stipulates that when a married man dies, a close relative, usually a brother, or a cousin or an uncle if no brother is available, is to marry the widow in order to keep the family line going. It is a law indicative of a culture steeped in patriarchy.

We know what happened next – Orpah kissed Naomi goodbye, went back to her own family and stayed in Moab. We did not know what happened to her afterward. But Ruth, whose name means “friendship”, clung to Naomi, ignoring Naomi’s instructions and sang her famous covenant of love: *“Don’t force me to leave you; don’t make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I’ll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; Where you die, I’ll die, and that’s where I’ll be buried, so help me God. Not even death itself is going to come between us!”* What a beautiful message of love! Ruth pledges to stand by Naomi through thick or thin. Ruth expressed a God-like love for Naomi – one that was unconditional, honest and sincere.

There must be something in Naomi that Ruth saw or experienced. Perhaps it was Naomi’s good heart – perhaps it was her strength of character – resilient and caring, that made Ruth cling to her. Perhaps Ruth felt welcomed and embraced by her mother-in-law despite the fact that Ruth was from another tribe – another culture. Or perhaps, Ruth experienced first hand how Naomi cared for Orpah and Ruth. She called them daughters. Her affection for them went beyond the required, ‘You married my son, so I will love you’ idea. By accepting Orpah and Ruth, Naomi acknowledged that God’s love wasn’t just for her people, but for all people. This pledge of loyalty made by Ruth to her mother-in-law was a very strong commitment to any kind of relationship. Ruth’s decision to leave Moab, her family roots and her culture to be with Naomi would possibly spin Ruth into barriers that might break her: language, social customs, religious traditions, political ties or the daily reminders around her that say: “She is NOT one of us!” But Ruth took her stand, went with Naomi and began a new life.

Naomi and Ruth took a new road, not because they know what will happen at the end of it, but because they cannot find a new life without walking through it. Ruth, the stranger, the widow, the enemy woman, becomes a model of loyalty and devotion. She, the outsider, keeps the nation from extinction, ends barrenness and ethnic purity. Her story proclaims that God is God for all

people – of all colour, race or creed. Matthew’s birth narrative of Jesus includes Ruth as the ancestor of Jesus, making Jesus an offspring of a mixed race, a crossover from the past to the new. Ruth and Naomi put the meaning of a family to a new level. It reminded me of Rudyard Kipling’s definition of a family: *“A family shares things like dreams, hopes, possessions, memories, smiles, frowns, and gladness... A family is a clan held together with the glue of love and the cement of mutual respect. When there is love and mutual respect, a family becomes a shelter from the storm, a friendly port when the waves of life become too wild. No person is ever alone who is a member of a loving family.”*

There is a beautiful ending to the story of Ruth. A new husband, Boaz, and new promises. A grandmother, Naomi, who gets to hold her grandson named Obed. This child is family to her not because of blood, but because Ruth continues to call her mother. Ruth redefines family for us as well. In the midst of bitterly disappointing circumstances, Ruth and Naomi found and gave themselves to each other. They made the most of what they had rather than dwelling too much on the griefs, disappointments and their losses. In the end, the women of Bethlehem tell Naomi that her daughter-in-law, Ruth, who loves her, is worth more than seven sons. This was a revolutionary thing to say in a male-dominated, patriarchal society, but they spoke the truth. Ruth and Naomi were life-givers, nurturers, mothers. Their relationship broke many boundaries – ethnicity, age, status, tradition, faith. They were family not by blood, but by a friendship founded on mutual, unconditional love.

As we celebrate and honour all kinds of mothers, nurturers, life-givers, as we honour families in all of their diverse configurations, let us rejoice about the many Ruths we have today. Let us remember those who chose to live out of love and devotion. Let us not forget the many Naomis we know. These are women who have been forgotten, abused, and hurt. These are mothers whose heart aches with loss, grief, and even bitterness. Let us pray for them the blessing Ruth and Naomi had been given, reach out to them, that they might also experience redemption, new life, and love even from those who are not of their flesh and blood. Let us be reminded, in the spirit of life-giving exemplified by Ruth and Naomi, that even in death and loss, there is the possibility of new beginnings, of new life and new hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.