

## 1 Love that Endures Ruth 1

2

*1 In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.*

*<sup>6</sup> Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.<sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. <sup>8</sup> But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. <sup>10</sup> And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."*

*<sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, <sup>13</sup> would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." <sup>14</sup> Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.*

*<sup>15</sup> And she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law."<sup>16</sup> But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." <sup>18</sup> And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more.*

*<sup>19</sup> So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, "Is this Naomi?" <sup>20</sup> She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; <sup>[a]</sup>call me Mara,<sup>[b]</sup> for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. <sup>21</sup> I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"*

*<sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.*

### Introduction

I was shocked to discover as I looked through my old files both on the computer and pre computer days that I had never preached though the book of Ruth. Ruth existed to me in the Bible as a book that was there but not really read. Sort of like Jayber Crowe, it was given to me but it just didn't look interesting. And then I read it and it was one of my favorites. Ruth is like that having lived in it now for quite a while. I mean two widows on a journey, don't look that engaging, but guess again. It is breathtaking as it explores, God's relentless love, God's overarching sovereignty, and enduring love in relationships.

Paul Miller in his book, **3** *A Loving Life: in a World of Broken Relationships* says of Ruth this and I pray this for each of us at St. Patrick. *I hope the book of Ruth affects you the way a trip to the Grand Canyon or Chartres Cathedral near Paris might. How do you apply the Grand Canyon or Chartres? Of*

course, you don't apply the Grand Canyon—you are stunned by the beauty. You don't apply Chartres—you worship there. You stop talking as you let it fill your soul. You are silent as your soul expands. You sense that you don't have enough capacity to capture the beauty—the experience of entering and beholding beauty is too much. (Paul Miller, *A Loving Life: in a World of Broken Relationships*)

Here is why. The big themes of redemption, sacrificial and enduring love—the love we will see in Jesus, the love that will change things and us—are all here. Love that will ultimately die on a cross, we see on stage in the flesh and blood of a young woman, who just made hard choices that looked like and felt like death for a season, only to find on the other side resurrection and ultimately her offspring who would literally experience real resurrection. So, in a world of Disney defined love, in a culture that loves to feel love and get started in love but not how to finish we find Ruth. And perhaps for some of us a way out of our malaise.

The story we see in verse one is stuck right in the middle of the equivalent Old Testament equivalent of the Old Wild West—an unsettled lawless place. It is during the book of Judges, one of the bleakest times in Israel's history. This is after the time of Joshua when Israel conquered the land and before the monarchical period starting with Saul. Judges says of this period, *every person did what was right in their own eyes*. It is a place where there is inner tribal wars, unchecked lawlessness, and violent invasions and subjugation threaten to sink this foundling nation before it ever begins. Yet by the shape of the story we see behind it all a God so committed to his people, he not only doesn't waste their suffering, but actually uses it to advance his story. So, let's look at the first the first chapter this morning. The first chapter has parts journey's, each are loaded. The Turn, The Return, The Welcome.

#### **4 The Turn**

*In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons.<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup> These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, <sup>5</sup> and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. (Ruth 1: 1-5)*

The story starts with a turn, a turn away from God. Suffering has a way of doing that doesn't it? Suffering usually reveals the heart. So, here is Elimelech in Bethlehem. Oh, and the names are important. **5**

- *Bethlehem* literally means *house of bread*. (They live in the breadbasket of Israel) and yet there is no bread.
- *Elimelech* means, *God is king*.
- *Naomi* means *pleasant*.

And yet, when suffering starts, Elimelech whose name means God is king or my king, takes his wife and two sons from the house of bread to sojourn in Moab, away from God into a place at enmity with Israel and who worship a false God. Naomi will later call herself—*bitter*. (Irony abounds, oh it gets better.)

#### **A couple of things here.**

- *Famine* in the Bible often is the place where God works, we see it over and over, famines, deserts—places where the only way you can survival is to truth in God's goodness. Suffering is the crucible for love, for faith, we simply do not learn it any other place.
- And yet when trouble starts, we often abandon God or doubt his goodness. Elimelech leaves the land where God is uniquely present, the promised land and takes his family to Moab, just for a season, *a sojourn* the text says and this turning from God will begin the slow descent into suffering—especially for his wife Naomi. Elimelech will quickly die, Naomi is to learn there are things worse than death.

Now Moab you remember is a nation at enmity with Israel. There is bad blood here.

- It was started with incest in the days of the patriarchs,
- then the Moabites you remember wouldn't let the children of Israel pass through their land in their wanderings.
- The women of Moab seduced the Israelite men. (There is bad blood here, ethnic strife. This is a disparate move)

Going to Moab means trouble and yet instead of Elimelech repenting of disobedience which Leviticus and Deuteronomy both said would result in famine—Elimelech is pragmatic, he says there is immediate satisfaction—food in Moab and so they turn from God and the further away they go the worse it gets.

This also despite the fact that they will be refugees in a foreign land. All the safety nets of family, kith and kin are removed. You ever been in a foreign country? Hostile to your own? A lot different from standing from a hostile policeman after getting pulled over for a ticket. I was in Los Angeles at my first General Assembly in like 1989. On an off day we drove to Tijuana Mexico. After going through customs, we were immediately pulled over by the police. We had no proof of insurance and other things, and they were saying we would go to jail, *it would cost us one thousand, two thousand three thousand dollars to get out of jail*. I was scared to death. I imagined dying in the Tequila jail. But for a moment I felt panic. I knew no one. I had no reputation, no one was sympathetic to me. I was utterly vulnerable. That is Elimelech and his family.

There shortly afterwards Elimelech dies and yet a ray of hope emerges when her two boys marry, then the most crushing suffering in the world crashes in on Naomi. Her sons die. She is a widow, with two daughters in laws in a foreign land. This is crushing in any place, but in this time a woman had no identity outside her home, no means of support, she has entered a living hell. She has reached the nadir. Further, her life has no purpose, no meaning—no future, no reason for living. **Where is God in all of this?** I mean what would you think? When even our modest expectations are not met, we are stuck with despair, cynicism and often shutting our hearts off from God.

You been there? You there now? What are you going to do? What are you doing? This is the crucible; this is where we are made or unmade. Give in to bitterness? I have, I have literally thought, how do I live? How do I go on? And when you get there, you can give in and sink everyone around you that is embedded in your life and that looks to you, or you turn. We see that in the story. Ten times in first chapter, turn or return is used.

### 5a The Return

*<sup>6</sup> Then she arose with her daughters-in-law to return from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the fields of Moab that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.<sup>7</sup> So she set out from the place where she was with her two daughters-in-law, and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah.*

When suffering hits, you must return. There is no blessing unless you return home, back to God, back to the place of God's favor. Naomi somehow does just that. Now what is interesting about her return is it is messy, it is not full of pure motive, but it has one thing--hope, "*she heard that the Lord had visited his people and given them food.*" How much faith do you need? Just enough to start. So, she set out with her two daughters-in-law. We see a hint at her character in this one statement. With all the stories about mother-in-law's and daughter in laws? Holy cow that they would go with her gives us a glimpse into what they see in her. They just follow her. So, she sets out, one weary step in front of the other. But with the hope of God's favor. After this crushing loss she sets out and before long we see real love and we are going to follow this out in this dialogue because it is the heart of the text and as one writer has said, we are at ground zero in the school of charity. We will camp here because the essence of Christianity is love, heaven in a world of love and mostly what we see and hear of love and even practice of love in our age looks nothing like this.

After she starts home, she says this to her daughters in law. **6<sup>8</sup>** *But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you*

have dealt with the dead and with me. <sup>9</sup> The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" The word *deal kindly* is the word for love in the Old Testament—*hesed*. It is the word used to describe what real love is. It is a loyal love, or steadfast love. It means--sacrifice. **7** Sometimes *hesed* is translated "steadfast love." It combines commitment with sacrifice. *Hesed* is one-way love. Love without an exit strategy. When you love with *hesed* love, you bind yourself to the object of your love, no matter what the response is. So if the object of your love snaps at you, you still love that person. If you've had an argument with your spouse in which you were slighted or not heard, you refuse to retaliate through silence or withholding your affection. Your response to the other person is entirely independent of how that person has treated you. *Hesed* is a stubborn love. (Paul Miller, *Loving People*) See this is the opposite of the cultural view love in our culture, which has us only acting on feelings. **No, biblical love says you act on your commitments, feelings follow.**

Don't you see what our culture is so messed up, if we only act on feelings we become good at starting but bad at finishing. I was talking to William a boy I married a year ago and we just had the big wedding. At one point I just looked at him and said, "How is it going?" Really well. Like, not as easy as I thought but. I said, yea, a year in the school of love in marriage is something. I told him a story of being madly in love with Teri and getting married and after three months thinking, what the heck have I done! (Teri was too.) See, when feelings die, *hesed* has to kick in. I stay because of my commitment, my vows.

Naomi then asks that God bless them essentially with a home and husbands. Now here is where we see the depth of real committed love. For Naomi to seek the their highest good, which is what love does to the beloved, while she is working life in them, she is working death in herself. Because of her love, she is destroying her life so they can have a life. See in her mind God has dealt bitterly with her, she can't change that, but she can improve the lives of her daughter in laws. Love is always like this, love is substitution, *love is my life for yours*. I give my life and happiness for yours. I will die so you can live. She is giving up their love and companionship, willing to be alone and lonely to save their lives, and it is crushing to her. **8** Charles Williams called love exchange. *Blessed be He that He has made us members one of another and all members of Him... Blessed be He that He has quickened among [us] the unity, exchange and substitution of love which is the pattern of Himself... Blessed be He that He continually makes all things new.* (Charles Williams) God is making all things new as we love like this. Love that gives life often crushed the one offering it. (Next week we will talk about lament and what we do when this is our lot, but we can't this week, for now, let's just get in our minds what real love is. We need this, there are a thousand deaths in love.)

Where else do we see that? The cross. Jesus gave his life for us. All love is substitution. And yet that is not the end of the story of love is it? No because when you really love like this, you take joy in the joy of the beloved. There is always resurrection, we don't know when or how, often this is just a faith issue, but love is steadfast. Even when both girls try to stay, she is thinking about them, their needs and happiness. she argues with them. **9** <sup>9</sup> The Lord grant that you may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. <sup>10</sup> And they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." <sup>11</sup> But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters; why will you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? <sup>12</sup> Turn back, my daughters; go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, <sup>13</sup> would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me." <sup>14</sup> Then they lifted up their voices and wept again. And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. (Ruth 1: 9-14) See, even if she has children their time would run out and finally Orpah returns home, the obvious choice isn't it? But, now we see Ruth take center stage and actually out love Naomi if that is possible.

Ruth is clinging to her, see this picture, it all tears, lament, brokenness and let me say as Lewis says if you are not ready for this, don't ever love. Remember. **10** *There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to be*

sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. . . . The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell. (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*)

Now we see Ruth also broken by love. **11**<sup>16</sup> But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. <sup>17</sup> Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” <sup>18</sup> And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. (Ruth 1: 16-18) Now if possible, Ruth out loves Naomi. While Naomi seeks Ruth’s highest good, her motives, her faith is tinged with syncretism. Go back to the place of false God’s? And according to this statement, Ruth is a convert to Judaism, the one true God, “your God will be my God.” So deep is her pain, she is off track here—pragmatic even, but now look at Ruth, as one writer says, she pledges her love with “an incandescent reply that has set thirty centuries trembling.” (Cynthia Ozick, *Metaphor and Memory*) Essentially, she commits to Naomi for life. *Her going and lodging, her people and her God and then to die in Bethlehem long after Naomi is dead and gone.*

Ruth out *hesed*’s Naomi! In order to give Naomi support, friendship and food, she gives up the possibility of the familiar and the security of perhaps a new family and children. She embraces humanly speaking her future happiness to give Naomi hope! It is starker in light of this culture and a woman’s place in it. As Hubbard says in his commentary on Ruth, **12** “Ruth took on the uncertain future of a bitter widow in a land where she knew on one, enjoyed few legal rights, and—given the traditional Moabite-Israelite rivalry—faced possible ethnic prejudice. . . . She gave up a marriage to a man to devote herself to an old woman—in a world dominated by men. (Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*)

You say that seems too much? Is it, talk to the person who endures in love with a special needs child. Are they trapped? Yes, hemmed in by *hesed* love, enduring sacrificial, engaged love. Talk to someone with a spouse who is infirmed, and they stay put. Or to someone who has a teenage dealing with hard, hard issues. You feel trapped and yet when you don’t run and stay engaged—that is love. But what about God? God is trapped to by his own loving nature! We learn this from him. He says of Israel in Jeremiah 31:3, **13** *I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.* (Jeremiah 31:3) Love is what is in your not if you get love back.

Yet here me here. **14** *The more difficult the situation, the more you are forced into utter dependence on God. That is the crucible of love, where self-confidence and pride are stripped away, because you simply do not have the power or wisdom or ability in yourself to love. You know without a shadow of doubt that you can’t love. That is the beginning of faith—knowing you can’t love.* (Paul Miller, *Loving People*) This is why in Galatians we hear Paul say the whole Christian life is, **15** “. . . faith working itself out in love.” (Galatians 5:6) See you can’t love like this unless you have a vision of how God loves you. So many times in the crucible of love, unrequited love, I just want to disengage, or run and God says to me, this is how I loved you Jim, I nailed my son to a cross. I was crushed by love.

Oh, but what beauty, when you see real love like that you are in rarified air. It is arresting, it is beautiful. Isn’t it? I mean, who do we write stories about Oprah or Ruth. Who is and I am skipping ahead a bit, holding the future great, great, great grandfather of Jesus at the end of the story? Who ultimately finds resurrection?

The shape of love is always like this. You commit, then you do down, in death, you stay put, you endure and then resurrection. Love is death and resurrection, and you will never know resurrection joy unless you are willing to die, and you will never be willing to die unless you are constantly at the cross seeing the perfection of love, love enduring for you.

So Naomi returns back to a place of blessing, it is uneven, full of lament, bad thinking and next week we will talk about that, but what does she find when she comes home. The chapter ends with a glimmer of hope. quickly

## 16 The Welcome

<sup>22</sup> So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest.

After telling the women at the gate she has come home empty, even with Ruth who has loved much right beside her, what does she find? She is full of bitterness, despair, anger, and even tells the ladies at the gate, just call me “bitter!” That is where she is, that is who she is. She has returned, dirty, broken, sad, hurt angry and guess what—*God has set a table before her*. Like the prodigal, he just goes home, his motives are wrong, he just wants to be a slave and he is welcomed as a son. See here is the point, she has returned—not pure not clean, not saying, God has such a wonderful plan for my life. No in faith she took the right steps and God is there with a welcome. You see, it is not that Naomi is clinging to God, God is clinging to her and God’s embrace and is greeting is the annual barley festival in Bethlehem--a beer and bread festival. But you must start. You must turn, repent. Go to him and he will welcome you. And what about Ruth, she walks back into Bethlehem with only God seemingly, ignored by Ruth, her heroic sacrifice unacknowledged, her love not requited. Ruth walks into Bethlehem utterly alone—but not alone.

Years later, her greatest Son, Jesus Christ will do the same thing, alone he will walk to the cross. Why for you. **17**<sup>24</sup> *Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.* (John 12:24) That is the book of Ruth, that is love, that is the gospel! Let’s go to him