

“We’re all in this together”

Ruth 2:1-10

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Bethlehem. The old woman laughed bitterly at the irony of the name. Bethlehem means house of bread. But when famine struck right in the heart of the town whose name is house of bread, everything the old woman held dear had come crashing down. She left her home, that town of Bethlehem. She crossed the border, seeking refuge in a foreign land. She became a refugee. She was a stranger. She was an alien. Still, she and her family tried to piece their life back together. Her sons found wives in that foreign land. At one point she looked at her little family, her husband, her two sons with the new wives they had married in that foreign land, and she allowed herself to dream. Maybe, maybe, just maybe they could settle. Maybe they could survive. Maybe they could even thrive.

The old woman shook her head as she remembered those naïve dreams. Again, she laughed. Again, her laugh was bitter. And it was painful. It was always painful. She remembered each death like it had happened yesterday. First her husband. Then one son. Then the other. Death, followed by death, followed by death. The third death broke her. Her world had been emptied of all she held dear. She picked up whatever fragments of life remain when you have been widowed and have lost your children as well. She picked up the fragments of her life and made her way back to Bethlehem, back to the house of bread that had disappointed her in the first place, the house of bread that had disappointed her with that miserable famine.

Her return sparked interest. The town of Bethlehem was stirred. The women in particular were buzzing. “Can this be Naomi?” They recognized the one who spent so many years as part of their community. They also recognized a change, a profound change. “Can this be Naomi?” When the old woman spoke, the old woman named Naomi, it became clear to all that she had indeed changed. Naomi had been crushed. Her spirit had been stamped out. Things had indeed changed for

Naomi, Things had changed for the worse. “Don’t call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” When Naomi returned to Bethlehem, she returned as a bitter old woman. Sometimes this can be a ruthless world.

Mara is a word in the Hebrew language. Mara literally means “bitter”. Having lost her husband and her sons, Naomi labels her own life as being bitter. “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara because the Almighty has made my life very bitter.” Naomi lived in a day and time far removed from the present day, perhaps as long ago as one thousand years before the time of Christ. It goes without saying that I have never met Naomi. But I am well acquainted with Mara. Serving in Christian ministry for forty years, the great majority of those as an ordained pastor, I have come face to face with countless broken-hearted people who bear the name Mara. Like Naomi their lives have experienced bitterness.

Naomi experienced the bitterness of a famine, the bitterness of leaving her home, the bitterness of living as an exile, the bitterness of living as a refugee, the bitterness from the death of her husband and two sons, and the bitterness of returning to her home empty. Don’t call me Naomi, call me Mara. The Lord Almighty has made my life bitter. Each time I read the story of Naomi, a woman whose experience of life was bitter, I think of the many ones named Mara whom I have encountered. Tear-stained faces from my early years of ministry come to mind...

- The sweet and innocent girl in our middle school youth group whose idyllic world was crushed when her mother was diagnosed with cancer and soon died.
- The family whose son was killed in a tragic accident on an ATV.
- The church that wrestled with a young girl whose life was tragically taken away by a drunk driver, a young man who was electrocuted, and a beloved teen who died in a wreck.
- The mother who welcomed me into a surgical ICU room where her son, just a young man, lay dying from cancer.

Formative years at an inner-city church expanded our understanding of Mara.

- Southeast Asian refugees struggled to make the difficult adjustment of living in a new land. In addition, their children faced intense pressure to join local gangs.
- A weekly bible study at a women's shelter included constant testimonies about abuse, struggles with homelessness, battles with addictions, and a general feeling of failure coupled with a deep sense of abandonment.
- Mission trips into the heart of Mexico allowed our youth group to pour their hearts out in meaningful ministry, but that ministry was among ones living in abject poverty, making homes on sites that were once used as a dump, ones suffering from illnesses related to lack of food, lack of medical care, lack of access to clean water.
- A team from our church embarked on a mission in Albania as the walls of communism crumbled. Among a people celebrating their newfound freedom, it was a sobering reality to hear the stories of the oppression they endured for decade upon decade. These horrible tales of oppression spoke to a bitter reality that was shocking.

In foreign countries, in inner cities, in the lives of the young and the old, among the poor and among the rich, bitterness knows no boundaries. Naomi slowly made her way back to Bethlehem, her heart saddened by loss and her spirit crushed. "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara because the Almighty has made my life very bitter." This world in which we live can be such a ruthless place.

Naomi is not alone. In her deep sadness and the overwhelming sense that her life was bitter, Naomi is not alone. So many others, perhaps all of us, have encountered moments, days, even seasons of life that were ruthless. In her feeling that life is bitter and ruthless, Naomi is not alone.

While Naomi is not alone in feeling the bitterness and ruthlessness of life, the story that unfolds in the four chapters that make up the Book of Ruth reveals the powerful and profound truth that amid all the

heartbreak, all the loss, all the disruption and displacement, all the mourning and grief and sorrow, amid even the bitterness and ruthlessness of life, Naomi is not alone. Naomi has Ruth. Because Naomi has Ruth, her life is not empty. Because Naomi has Ruth, her life is literally not Ruth-less. Ruth is the living embodiment of tenacity, of perseverance, of hope, and of lovingkindness. Because Ruth is in her life, Naomi's desire to change her name to Mara, the bitter one, fades away as this sweet little saga ends with laughter and tears of joy. Oh no, this is not a story about a ruthless world. This story is a poignant testimony of the amazing difference that comes from even one single person whose life is filled with lovingkindness. The Book of Ruth is a story of lovingkindness.

I want to ask you if you have ever met Ruth. The people of Israel met Ruth. Every year when the people of Israel gathered to celebrate the Feast of Weeks, they would read the Book of Ruth. When you read this sweet little book, just four chapters in length, when you allow yourself to be bathed in the wonderful blessings of lovingkindness, you meet Ruth.

Have you ever been a stranger, an outsider, the new person, wondering if you could find a place in this new situation, if you would ever belong, if this would ever feel like home, and someone made room for you, someone greeted you, someone gave you a place of belonging, if you were ever a stranger and someone welcomed you, then you have met Ruth.

Have you ever had someone who stuck closer to you than a friend, someone who had your back, someone who held your hand when you were afraid, dried your tears when your heart was breaking, who listened to your lament, and who whispered words of comfort and hope, if you have had someone draw you to their breast and say, "I will never leave you and I will never forsake you," then you have met Ruth.

Have you ever had someone notice you when you barely hanging on, when you were living on the margins, struggling to survive? If you have ever received a bag of groceries when the cupboard was bare, a new tire after you suffered a blowout, a loan to cover you during a rough

patch, a ride when you weren't able to drive, maybe even a roof over your head in a time of need, then you have met Ruth.

Have you ever known someone who goes the extra mile? Has someone stepped up and done what is really an act of sacrificial giving? Has anyone you know donated a kidney, donated a scholarship, given the gift of adoption, put their life on hold so that someone else could hold on to their life? If you have ever met someone willing to lay down their life for another person, then you have met Ruth.

Have you ever been present when the weeping suddenly and miraculously changes to laughter? When the mourning turns to dancing? When the sorrow gives way to shouts of joy? When despair is cast off and hope sweeps in with all the promises of a healthy and happy future. If you have ever witnessed the one who is bitter become better than you have met Ruth.

Once a year the people of Israel would gather to remember the mighty acts of the Exodus, when God saw the misery of his people as they languished under the cruel and oppressive bonds of slavery, a slavery in which the children of God were treated ruthlessly. Ruthlessly. Right there in Exodus. God saw their misery, he heard their cries, he was concerned, and so God came down to help. And boy, did God come down to help. In Exodus we see the mighty hand of God on full display. Once a year the people of God would remember the Exodus by celebrating the Passover Feast.

Once a year the people of God would gather to remember the story of Ruth. They would read about famine and leaving home, living as refugees, being welcomed and given shelter, about vows of loyalty and acts of compassion, about sacrificial giving and finally, about as human a thing as you could imagine, the unexpected birth of a child who not only brings joy to Naomi and Ruth and the whole town of Bethlehem, but perhaps most importantly, keeps the generations intact so that the final words of Ruth tell us, "Boaz became the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the Father of David."

In Ruth there are none of the fireworks you find in Exodus. Exodus has gruesome plagues and the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea. Manna miraculously comes down from heaven. Water springs forth from a rock

in the desert. In Ruth, what you find is a family seeking refuge who come to a land where people make room. In Ruth you find a guy named Boaz who owns a field...and, who leaves some grain behind in case a poor person, a widow, an orphan, a stranger, an alien, needs to grab some of that spare grain just so they can survive. In Ruth you find that same guy, Boaz, creating a safe space for Ruth to work without fear of being attacked or assaulted. In Ruth you again find that same guy, Boaz, one day accepting the call to carry on the family name of a relative by becoming first a husband to Ruth, and then a father, fulfilling the role of Naomi's son who died during those tragic years in Moab. In Ruth you find Naomi, once as bitter as she could be, holding a newborn baby boy, clutching that precious child to her chest as the women of town, the women of Bethlehem, gather around and share in the joyful celebration. And in Ruth you find the woman who bears that sacred name so well, saying to her mother-in-law at Naomi's lowest point, "Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." No fireworks. No dramatic intervention of God. But in each and every act of lovingkindness, the hand of God was at work. And if Ruth might have one thing to say to us, both Ruth the Moabite woman and Ruth the Book of the Bible, that one thing might be, "We are all in this together."

The genealogy that provides the closing to the Book of Ruth also serves to open the door for the birth of David, the shepherd who would become the king. If you ever take time to read the genealogy found in Matthew chapter one, the genealogy of all the generations leading not only to David, but also from David to Jesus, who like his ancestor David was born in Bethlehem, you will find the same names in Matthew as you find in the closing verses of Ruth. Unlike his ancestor David, the shepherd who became the king, the gospels let us know Jesus is the King who becomes the shepherd, and so much more. In fact, it is in the first chapter of Matthew that an angel appears to Joseph and tells him how the miraculous birth of Jesus will fulfill the ancient promise of Isaiah:

“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God is with us.”)

Like Exodus, like the Passover, like the parting of the Red Sea and the miraculous manna from heaven, Jesus brings lots of fireworks. Jesus heals the sick and raises the dead. Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes and feeds the multitudes. Jesus walks on water and calms the storm. Jesus brings lots of fireworks, divine intervention, mighty acts of God, and many, many miracles. At the same time, like that book that played such a central role in his family tree, like the book that tells of the line and lineage of David, like the Book of Ruth, so much of what Jesus did and said demonstrated the lovingkindness of God, the acts of compassion and concern, the moments of mercy, the constant call for justice and righteousness, and the never-ending push for peace. Jesus, as Immanuel, Jesus as God with us, Jesus embodied the lovingkindness of God, which played such a central role in the beautiful book that we know as Ruth.

Jesus, the King who became our shepherd, never stops being our king. Late in the gospel of Matthew, the gospel that has a section of the genealogy that comes directly from Ruth, late in the gospel of Matthew Jesus, our King, tells a parable.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to

visit you?' The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'"

When Jesus says those powerful words about us doing the things of God to help other people, I can just imagine somewhere way back in the family tree of Jesus a grandmother, a great, great, great, great, great...and then some more...a great grandmother named Ruth wiping a tear from her eye, bowing her head and saying, "That's right Jesus, we're all in this together."