

# **Grounded**

## ***Determined***

### **Ruth 1:1–19 (NRSV)**

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. . .

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? . . . **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.

**Introduction.** During the first two decades of my ministry, I often heard a popular song sung at weddings, *Whether Thou Goest, I will Go*. As you might guess after hearing the scripture lesson, the lyrics of that song was taken from the book of Ruth. While I truly liked the song, I found it odd to be used at a wedding because I knew its original context - words spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. I have tried to imagine a wedding the bride pausing in the service to go to her prospective mother-in-law and sing, "Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge."

In the original context of this poem, the words speak profoundly to the depth of relationship that helped to sustain two people in a rather dire situation. *The grounding of that relationship provided a channel through which God grace flowed not only to bless the lives of the two women in the story but to provide a grace filled history for the Jewish nation and in turn the world.*

I invite you to join me in hearing their story.

### **The Story and the Challenge.**

*Elimelech, his wife, Naomi and two sons lived in Bethlehem when a famine came.* In that day and in that part of the world, famines were serious business that led not only to hard times but to people dying of starvation. So like many throughout history, Elimelech, attempted to figure out a way to provide for his family. He decided to relocate them to Moab where he heard there was food and work.

*Now Moab was a unique choice to move for this Jewish family.* For the most part of Jewish-Moabite history, tension existed between the two people group. They were not the closest of friends and I imagine that a great deal of distrust and prejudice existed between them.

Not too long after this family had relocated, the unthinkable happened. *Elimelech died.* Imagine being a widow and living in a foreign country without your network of support. Fortunately, her sons were old enough to provide for her. These two men married Moabite wives and together they took care of Naomi. This was not the mid-life Naomi had dreamed of.

*After about a decade the third wave of tragedy hit the family. Both of Naomi's sons died.* Relocation because of famine, the death of Elimelech and the death of her sons. At that point, Naomi was widowed and left with her two widowed daughter-in-laws.

*Now the overwhelming emotional impact of these losses must have been paralyzing for Naomi.* But there was another matter that was just as dire. How could she and her daughter-in-law's survive?

*A couple of weeks ago, I saw a post in Facebook from our church family who serves as missionaries in India.* Because of Covid-19 flare up in the area where they live, they were undergoing a strict lockdown. Unlike most of us who have a pantry, refrigerator and freezer filled with goods, they did not have time to stock up. Their provisions were getting thin for their family of 7. I began to wonder about whether they would have enough to eat. (Many, if not most of us, realize there are people who do not have enough food and survival is a serious question.)

### **Weird Cultural Customs.**

When many of us look back at the story of Naomi, *we are struck by the weird cultural customs of her day.* Some of these cultural norms not only seem unusual, they feel unjust.

In Naomi's world, in both her native land and the Moabite nation, women were dependent upon men for their security. There were no systems in place to take care of widows outside of the family. Additionally, few women given equal opportunities to men. Property rights, business

and legal matters were part of the men's club and women were excluded from the club. **If a woman was widowed, it would be responsibility of her sons to take care of her.**

**If there were no sons, then the custom of kinsman-redeemer came into play.** The nearest in kin male was to marry the widow to care for her and to provide her a son who would inherit the original husband's property. Thereby the man's name would not die but the family be kept alive.

Imagine what that would mean. If you are a married woman and your husband dies and you have no children, one of your brother-in-laws would marry you. (Of course, polygamy was necessary under this system). If you are a man and your brother dies, you are supposed to marry his widow. **That really feels like a weird system, doesn't it?**

Human society at any point of history and in any corner of the globe has had weird, unjust and unfair cultural norms and practices which potentially harm and limit some people. In the past couple of months, our nation has been confronted with one of our cultural practices in how many people of color have been treated because of the color of their skin. For those of us who have accumulated a few birthdays, we have seen this issue around and fortunately improve significantly. No longer are our school, water fountains and restaurants segregated. But there is more work needed.

**Unfortunately, people have and do live under these cultural practices that cause harm.** Many of whom have little power to change the culture which often takes a long time to change. Naomi and her daughter-in-laws were under such a system. What is amazing in their story is that they were not only able to survive, but **God was able to act graciously on their behalf through and in spite of the system.**

### **Pulling away.**

Naomi felt the full impact of her situation. She heard what could be considered good news about her homeland. **The famine was over and there was plenty of food. So she made the decision to return home.** When her daughter-in-laws learned of her plan, they decided to go with her.

Naomi insisted that the women return to their family's home. **It seems on the surface her motivation for persuading the girls to return rested in her concern for their welfare.** If they stayed among their own people and family, they could marry again and be provided for by their new husbands. Additionally, if they were to go to Bethlehem, they may be looked down on and treated poorly because they were from Moab.

But I wonder if there was another, **much deeper issue going on with Naomi.** We see evidence of this when she got back to Bethlehem and the women of the town greeter her by asking if it was really Naomi. Her response was that she was no longer Naomi but Mara (which in Hebrew means bitter) because her life had become bitter.

**Maybe her pain and bitterness had driven Naomi to attempt to pull away from those who loved her and thus send them back home.** Maybe she has sunken into a state of learned helpless because of her trauma and wanted to get away from it as much as possible. She felt she could do nothing to reverse her fate or that of her daughter-in-law.

I don't know you but I often find myself wrestling with this temptation when times are really tough around me. Whether the traumas are widespread such as Covid-19, family matters such as a prolonged illness, church matters that seem relentless or personal matters come, I sometimes want to turn away and turn inward rather than leaning strongly into those relationships that are life giving.

## רַחֵם

One of the daughter-in-laws, Orpah, was finally persuaded by Naomi to return to her mother's house. But Ruth refused to leave Naomi. She clung to her mother-in-law and the relationship they had.

In this part of the story, we must understand that Ruth was hurting as was Naomi. No doubt her pain was as deep because her husband during her young adult stage of life died. Never is it easy to lose a spouse but losing one during the early years often intensifies the pain because that is not supposed to happen. Yet despite her pain, she chose to lean heavily into her relationship with Naomi.

The story teller uses a rich Hebrew word to describe the nature of Ruth's relationship with Naomi. As a matter of fact this word is used for Orpah as well. But it is Ruth who continues to show it. The word is רַחֵם – which is typically used to describe God's loving relationship toward us. It is sometimes translated as "kindness" as it is in this story. Sometimes it is translated as "mercy" as in Psalm 23 – *Surely goodness and mercy (רַחֵם) shall follow me*). Perhaps its best translation is "steadfast love" as seen in Psalm 136 where it is the liturgical response of the people in each verse: *O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.* רַחֵם is love that is kind, merciful and enduring.

That was the mark of Ruth's love for Naomi. Ruth loved Naomi even when she was in a state of learned helplessness. She loved her as she was attempting to pull away. She loved her even when she was hurting. She loved her even when going with her was a huge risk to her on well-being. Ruth leaned into this relationship even when she was not likely to get a great deal in return.

A few weeks ago, we conducted a survey of our congregation about how we have been impacted by Covid-19. I appreciate all of you who took the survey. We have posted the results for you. (Brett can we post this as part of the Live Stream??) One thing that stood out to me was the desire we have for connection and fellowship with one another and how we feel we have been limited by this virus. 78% of you said you miss our fellowship. We know how important our relationships are. We face the challenge of how to lean into those relationships.

Ruth stepped out and leaned into her relationship with Naomi with true רַחֵם. Can we do the same with our relationships with one another? Can we help one another to remain grounded in our relationship?

### Post script.

In the story of Ruth and Naomi there is a message of amazing grace. As the story continues, Ruth ends up gleaning grain in the field of Boaz who is the second in line as a kinsman redeemer. A relationship develops that leads to him marrying Ruth. Not only do they have a son to carry on Naomi's inheritance but through this son will come the lineage of David. Through whom the nation was firmly established and God's plan of salvation made possible.

God worked through and despite of the weird cultural norms in which Naomi lived. God cared for her and Ruth and carried out his plan. God is able to work through trauma and cultural barriers to accomplish shower his love on us and accomplish His plan.

Sisters and brothers, God is at work among us even in this pandemic and all the tensions faced in our nation. God is not paralyzed or hampered by the difficulties we face.