

St. James UCC Havertown, PA
March 17, 2019 | Ruth 1:1-8, 14 & 19-21
Rev. Emily Garcia Livingston | “The Power of Loss”

Last week we began a preaching series called “Powered Up” where we will focus on the power found in several areas that can help improve or restore our relationship with God and other people. The season of Lent is an opportunity for us to reflect upon our faith journeys and to “power up” as we remember Jesus’ journey to the cross and the price He paid for our freedom.

For the first Sunday in Lent, we looked at the power of forgiveness and how it unfolded in the story of Joseph and his brothers. This week we will look at Naomi and Ruth as I talk about the power of loss. Depending upon what you lose, loss can be extremely difficult to live through. The death of someone you love; the death of a beloved pet; the loss of your health (and particularly when due to a terminal diagnosis); the loss of your job or career and consequently, the loss of your home -- these all may vary in the intensity of the pain they carry, but many people would consider these severe losses. What do we do when we experience an unsettling loss that turns our world upside down? Do we isolate ourselves from everyone we know? Do we curse God and the day we were born like Job did? Do we lose hope? Do we do a combination of what I just described or something else altogether?

Life is a journey and we don’t know where the path will take us. For Naomi, she had no idea how her world would change when her family left Bethlehem in search of a better life in Moab free from famine. At some point after relocating to Moab, we learn that Naomi’s husband dies. This is a significant loss for Naomi and it impacted her family. We go on to learn that her two sons marry women from the region and after a period of about 10 years, Naomi’s two sons also die. So here is Naomi, a widow, and a foreigner in the land of Moab, and both of her sons die??!! To say this is tragic is an understatement!! And let’s remember the time that Naomi was living in.

In this time of antiquity, Jewish women generally did not have property rights; if a woman was widowed, her chances of survival were linked to any male children she may have had. And if she didn’t have any male children, then prayerfully, her daughter’s family would take her in (and this is assuming her daughter was

married and the husband approved). And if she didn't have any children, she was assured a very harsh life of poverty and homelessness if family did not help. But here is Naomi who is a widow and both of her sons have died leaving her in an extremely precarious situation. And add to that that her sons had wives so you have three women in a household with very little means to really provide for themselves in a patriarchal and agrarian society.

Naomi's loss is staggering and shocking. And despite this, she immediately moves into action after the period of mourning. I find that remarkable. She decides to go back to her native land. She knows that her chances of surviving are much higher in Bethlehem than in Moab. Naomi urges her two daughters-in-law to go back to their respective families because she knows she can't provide a future for them and she also feels "cursed." Naomi feels that God has turned on her and she feels that her daughters-in-law will be better off with their own families, even though it's been years since they've lived with their own mothers.

We know from the story that Orpah ultimately decides to return to her family but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi's side. As a matter of fact, Ruth declares to Naomi that she's going to follow Naomi wherever she goes – even if it means going to Naomi's homeland, taking on a new faith, and being a "stranger" in a new land. Naomi realizes that she can't get rid of Ruth, so in deep grief and anger Naomi travels back to Bethlehem with Ruth.

Now it's difficult to pinpoint the exact mileage of their trip back to Bethlehem from Moab since it's not as simple as using GPS coordinates to find the shortest route through a dirt path used by caravans of humans and animals, but a fair estimation is that the trip took at least 7 to 10 days. So here are two women, traveling alone, during the tumultuous time of the judges in Israel's history (and that's another topic for another day) – on a long journey by themselves. Their courage and fortitude to undertake this journey needs to be recognized and highlighted.

Naomi and Ruth would have needed a sufficient amount of water to get through the dry land as well as food for themselves and any animals that they took with them. They could have been attacked by wild animals along the way; they could have been taken against their will, beaten, violated, and taken into slavery; the possessions they carried could have been stolen from them; they could have

become seriously ill or injured along the way and unable to finish the journey -- *all* of these scenarios were possible outcomes, but God protected them all the way back to Bethlehem.

When Naomi reached Bethlehem, her feelings of anger and grief were just as deep and as strong as when she started the trip in Moab. Naomi was so angry that she told the women in Bethlehem to call her “Mara,” which means “bitter” because God has dealt very bitterly with her, instead of calling her Naomi, which means “pleasant.” She went on to say that she left Bethlehem years ago full and blessed but she has returned empty and cursed. We hear Naomi’s words and understand that she is speaking out of anger and profound grief and loss. We have compassion for Naomi and I totally understand why she feels that way. And although her husband and two sons were now dead, did Naomi really return *empty*??

Naomi is unable to see, at that moment, that she did not come back empty. Yes, her husband and two sons left a void within her that would never be completely filled. Her grief is palpable as she speaks her truth and yet, the perspective of her situation from the outside is very different. But isn’t that what normally happens? We can’t always see our situation holistically when we’re in the middle of something, but many times, someone on the outside can. Naomi didn’t come back to her homeland alone. She returned *with* Ruth, a daughter-in-law whose love for Naomi, was very deep. This Ruth, the one who refused to leave Naomi’s side, would be the one who would bring some joy back into Naomi’s life. This Ruth, the outsider, would be the one who would help to restore Naomi from feeling empty to feeling full again, in a new way. This Ruth, who was a Gentile from Moab, would be grafted into the line of Jesus Christ and would become the great-grandmother of King David.

Experiencing a deep loss has a powerful way of reshaping your life. One way this happened with Naomi is that it propelled her into action. She could have stayed mourning and abandoned all hope, but had she done that, she would have been the next one to die. I believe the severity of her loss triggered something deep within her and her anger and grief propelled her into action. She wanted to live so she acted to save her life.

Another way that loss can reshape your life is that experiencing profound loss can cause you to step out and do something you would not normally do. Because you have lost something precious to you, things that may have inhibited you before are now 'out the window.' Loss has the ability to reframe your willingness to take chances and to embrace courage. And what's courage after all? Courage is not being fearless and facing things head on; courage means that in the face of fear, you dare to step out anyway. That is exactly what Naomi and Ruth did. Although they took great risks on travelling together back to Bethlehem, they knew they didn't have a choice if they wanted to survive. Courage and hope of a better life kept them moving as they travelled from Moab to Bethlehem.

A third way that loss can reshape your life is that you may be unable to see the blessings that are around you as you are in the midst of your pain and grief. The pain of loss can be excruciating and it can take away all of your energy. Your ability to see what's around you, and *who* is around you, can also be clouded. When Naomi's two sons died she wanted to be alone. That's a very natural response. She didn't want her daughters-in-law to suffer anymore and she felt that they would be better off without her. Ruth refused to leave Naomi and although Naomi was furious, I believe she really need Ruth. Naomi needed the companionship of someone who would love her through her pain of loss.

Fortunately for Naomi, she didn't stay in that place forever. She began to see that she wasn't alone...that she had Ruth. She began to see that Ruth was indeed a blessing and that opportunities were around them for them to have new lives. And this takes us to the final point that I want to raise: loss can allow you to see things anew. Naomi began to see that she and Ruth could have a secure future in Bethlehem, after all. She began to see that all was not lost. Although Ruth was not a Jewish woman, she was the widow of a Jewish man, without any children, so Naomi helped Ruth navigate the various cultural and religious practices of the Jewish people so that Ruth could find economic security and companionship.

By the end of the short book of Ruth, we see that Ruth gets married to a prosperous, kind, and God-fearing Jewish man named Boaz. When Ruth gives birth to their son Obed, the women in Bethlehem bless Naomi because of Ruth and say that a child has been born *to Naomi*. This is significant. In this society, to give birth to a son, and for a male child to be the first child born into a family, was a tremendous blessing. For the women to say that a son has been born to Naomi

speaks of the blessing and joy that Naomi also experienced by this child's birth. So, although Naomi suffered greatly with the passing of her husband and two sons, God filled Naomi with joy and hope and the promise of a blessed future through the birth of Obed.

Let us remember to walk with patience, kindness, non-judgement, and love with those who have experienced loss. There are no words that I can share that will take away the pain a person carries, when they have experienced a traumatic and profound loss. Sometimes our inability to remain quiet in the face of someone else's suffering is what compels us to say things that may not be the most helpful. It's OK to walk with that person in silence and to simply offer them your time, your undivided attention, your full self, your presence.

During the season of Lent, let us pray for the comfort, healing, and restoration of all those experiencing grief and loss. Let us remember and trust that God is able to bear our pain, our grief, and our anger. And thank God for Christ Jesus, who bore the unbearable for us, on the cross at Calvary. We serve an awesome God who is ABLE to restore us from emptiness and pain to fullness and joy.

AMEN!