



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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Giving God Room to Work Beyond Your Life

Ruth 1:8-18

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Here is a little of the setting of our Scripture this morning: Naomi and her husband Elimelech and two sons have moved from Bethlehem in Israel to Moab. And while they're in the region of Moab, across from the Dead Sea, her husband and her two sons die, likely killed. She's left with two daughters who are Moabite women. And in her great grief she prepares to go back to her homeland in Bethlehem. And it is in that setting where her two daughters-in-law come to her and plead to go with her...

Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me-- even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!" At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. 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 anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

In a recent USA Today poll on the most respected woman in America, the answer most given was "my mother." It makes sense. Mothers have to think beyond their own lives. It's what they do. And the older we get, the greater our admiration. I think, somewhere along the way, whether they were right or wrong, our mothers actually believed that all the vitamins were in the crust of the bread. That all of those piano lessons were not truly meant to be means of torture. That there was some value to cleaning up our rooms, and studying, and doing our homework, and finding the discipline to get home on time. That friends they tried to select for us and some they tried to de-select for us were for good reasons, because they cared deeply for us. The older we get, the more we are able to see in our mothers the sacrifices they made for us. In some ways, a mother's love could be captured in the Greek word "agape." It means sacrificial love. It is used to describe Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for us. This is God's agape. God's love for us is shown in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died on the cross for us. And in some very real and tangible way, we see a picture of the grace of God and the love of God known in Jesus Christ through our moms, lived out in hands, and hugs, and fun, and a smile. We are journeying through this "Giving God Room to Work" campaign, simply in order to be able to share more of his agape love with people.

Our passage today is an ancient story, a beautiful story of two women: Ruth and Naomi. I encourage you to read all 4 brief chapters of Ruth. Listen to the "rest of the story." Naomi is living as a widow in a foreign land. Her husband, and her sons are gone, and she has nothing left. She hears the rains have come again to Bethlehem and she tells Orpah and Ruth to marry Moabite men. She tells them "I'm an old woman, and I'm going back home." And the young women cry and say "Please, let us go with you." Orpah did what most of us do. She kissed her and hugged her, and told her how much she loved her, but she went back to her home. That's what most of us do. Someone needs our help, and we offer to help, and they say "No thank you, I don't need it." And we accept that. And they say it graciously and we both mean it. End of story.

But here's what Ruth did, which made her exceptional, and here's where she gave God room to work: She knew, in this situation, that no really meant yes. Go really meant come. And she said to her mother-in-law "I will not leave you." And she gave this promise: one of the most beautiful promises in all the Scriptures, made between any two human beings. She said "*Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will be buried. And may the Lord do so to me and more if anything but death parts us.*"

Here are 3 Things we can learn from each of these women, about Giving God Room to Work in *our* lives, and beyond: First, though Naomi was a woman of faith and a great Biblical character, she still experienced tragedy in her life. The word Naomi means "pleasant or full" but she changed her own name to Mara, which means "bitterness" because she experienced great tragedy and bitterness in life. Jesus said "*In this world you will have great trouble.*" God did not take Naomi's husband. God did not take her sons, but these things happen. They happened then, they happen now. Tragedy sometimes comes even to the best of people. Don't let tragedy in someone else's life impede you from loving them.

Second, when Naomi experienced tragedy, she blamed God, just like many of us do. She said "The Lord has brought this upon me. I don't get it. The Lord has taken these away from me." It doesn't matter if one was to argue with her "Maybe the Lord didn't do that." It's all she could see at that time, just like some of us have blamed God for things that God did not do, but at the time it feels like it. It feels like God let us down and wounded us and hurt us.

But look at the last thing: Even though she blamed God, she didn't turn her back on God. She continued to trust God. Just like Job. He was experiencing all kinds of tragedy and pain. His friends said "Job, just curse God and die!" Call it a day and give up. And Job said "Even though He slay me, yet will I serve Him." No matter what happens in my life, I cannot give up on Him, because if I give up on God, where will I turn?" So many of us turn away from God in the midst of tragedy, and yet when we do, we turn away from the One who can help us. The One who can take tragedy and bring something good out of it. The One who can redeem it. The One who promises to be with you and keep you, who will never forsake you. He doesn't promise you will never experience tragedy. He promises He'll walk with you through it.

What do we learn from Ruth? First, there are times when God calls us to stick by someone even when they pretend or believe that they don't need our help. You've had this happen. We say "Call me if you need anything." Right? We feel better when we say that. And we mean it. But they never call... They never call, because they feel like it's an imposition. But you know what people say? "Y'know what really ministered to me, was that woman or man that didn't say "Call me if you need anything" but they showed up on my doorstep and said "I'm here, I've got two hours, what can I do?" And when I said "no" they said "I'm coming in" and they mowed my yard, they did my dishes, they sat with me and held my hand and read the Bible to me. It was that person I will never forget. I don't remember the names of all the people who said "Call me if you need anything." But I remember the person who stood by me." If you're feeling convicted by this story, good. Because I sure do. How many times I've said those exact words! What Ruth knew is there are times you don't say that, you just do it. You go and stick by the person. She sacrificed everything she knew. She gave up everything to stay with this woman who was all alone and stuck by her. The lesson here: If you really want to experience God, quit only paying lip service to Him, or doing the minimal. Change. Get serious about the joy that is yours when you give Him room to work in your life. Don't just make it a cultural thing. Go for the God-sized calling.

Second, when Ruth moved to Bethlehem, she didn't sit around and bemoan her victimization. She went out in the field to glean some of the leftover grain. She was taking care of Naomi, who was old and couldn't meet her own needs. Women couldn't get jobs in that time. She supplied the needs of her mother-in-law and her self. But here's what happened: the townspeople noticed this woman: though she was a Moabite, she was a woman of remarkable commitment and character. They said "Who among *us* would do such a thing as this?" And the man who owned the field, Boaz, watched this day by day, and he fell in love with her. Not her beauty. Not her hair, or her make up or clothes, because she didn't look like that when she was in the fields. He fell in love with her heart. So Boaz said to the servants, "Don't harvest quite so much. Why don't you leave a little extra grain out there, on accident." And pretty soon, Ruth began to notice the exceptional character of Boaz, who was generous and giving, unlike the young men who were constantly trying to hit on her. Though he was not as handsome as some, or as young as some, she looked into his heart and said "This is the kind of man I would love." Enter Naomi, the matchmaker. "Ruth, here's how we do it in Bethlehem..." (You can read it for yourselves!)

Third, through her sacrifice and giving, Ruth was blessed beyond her life. After she was blessed, and they married, she gave birth to a son named Obed. And they laid Obed on Naomi's lap and she began to rejoice and said "I am no longer bitter. My life is full again! This is like my own son and I will love him and care for him. And she rejoiced in the Lord,

and her end was better than her beginning. And that child grew up to give birth to Jesse, who gave birth to David, the King of Israel. King David was known for his love of the Lord. Don't you think Ruth had something to do with it?

The last thing: How God works. Most of us pray, and we ask God to fix things. We sort of do that with our 3rd grade faith. And when it doesn't work that way, we get really disappointed with God. Listen: God is not Ali-Baba. God is not the genie and we rub the Bible and He comes and grants us 3 wishes "What do you want?" God does *not* often work by breaking the laws he established in nature. But this is how God works: He works through people—people who are sensitive to His direction, who have yielded their hearts and lives to Him and said "Lord, whatever You want from me, I want to do that." And God says "There are places and ways I want to use you. Are you willing to do the hard things? Are you willing to make difficult choices? Are you willing to stick by somebody, or are you only willing to pay lip service and say 'Well, if you need me, call me.'" God works through people.

We can reflect the agape love of Jesus to each other, AND to all the lost, unconnected people all around us who don't know whether anyone really cares enough to stick by them through the difficult times. How many people don't understand the meaning of sacrifice, let alone the experience of it through a God who was willing to lay it all down, in order for us to know that He is sticking by us, never willing that any one should perish? If you were to ask Ruth "Would you do it all over again?" she'd say "You know, God has blessed me so richly, that my sacrifice was nothing but pure joy for what he's done for me." That's how God works—through people who are willing to stick by people. Next week, we'll be bringing our sacrifices in the form of 3-year commitment cards. And in 10 years, when someone asks "Would you do it all over again," I'll bet each of us who steps out in faith and gives God room to work will answer by sharing "You know, God has blessed me so richly, that my sacrifice was nothing but pure joy for what he's done for me. He has blessed me even beyond my life."

There are people in our church who are struggling—with cancer, with depression, with difficult family situations, with difficult financial situations, right here at Dexter UMC. Listen to me: When we say we are "Giving God Room to Work," what we're saying is, "We're not going anywhere." We are sticking by each other, no matter when the stuff comes. I'm not going to let you go alone or let you down. I am there for you.

Let us pray: Lord, we give you thanks and praise that you have called us to be your people; that you've invited us to be used by you; that you've placed your Holy Spirit in our hearts so that we can stand by others and listen to your Word, that we can be your people and be your instruments to stand and to bless. On this day we thank you for our mothers who sacrificially loved us. We thank you for our mother-in-laws, those of us who have them, or our daughter-in-laws, and we pray that you would help us be a blessing to them. We ask, O God, that you would help us be sensitive to your Spirit's leadership as we offer our lives to you. May we give you all the room to work in every moment, and in all our lives, that you may be able to work in the lives of others beyond us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

(I am indebted to Adam Hamilton of UM Church of the Resurrection and a sermon he preached entitled "Ruth: A Woman of Courage & Character").