

UNEXPECTED COMMITMENT

Unexpected Series (Part 2) | Text: Ruth 1:6-22

It's a pleasure to welcome you today to Part Two of a multi-week exploration of the Book of Ruth. Other than the story of Jesus himself, I don't know another narrative in the Bible that is more relevant for the times that you and I are living through right now than this story we started studying together last week. The Book of Ruth is about a group of people confronted by an unthinkably difficult and unexpected CRISIS that threatens their livelihood and very lives and which, therefore, demands an extraordinarily creative response from them. Sound familiar?

The details of the story are not exactly like what you and I and our world is going through right now, but the things these people did in response to what they faced are definitely the kinds of behaviors that you and I would do well to pursue in relationship to the challenges of our times. So, let me just provide a quick summary of where we are for those who couldn't be here last week.

A Jewish woman named Naomi has moved from her home country, Judah, to the hostile land of Moab in the East. She's gone there with her husband to escape a terrible famine that threatens to starve her family. There in Moab, everything that could go wrong does go wrong. Naomi's husband, Elimelech, suddenly dies young. Her two sons, who have married Moabite women, also mysteriously perish. Naomi is a triply bereaved, aging stranger in a foreign land with no reasonable hope of supporting herself. If you had told Naomi ten years earlier that she was going to find herself in this position, she would likely have said, "No way. Not me." This whole situation was totally UNEXPECTED.

So, what does Naomi do? The Bible suggests that she paid attention to the news. She refused to wallow forever in despair and kept her wits about her and surveyed the world around her for some sign of hope, some tiny crack in the door of opportunity that she might move toward, and finally Naomi met it. Word on the street was that the tide of disaster in Judah that had first driven her toward Moab had shifted. The famine there had receded. The economy was coming back. **⁶When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.**

Along the journey, however, Naomi has a second thought... **⁸Then 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. ⁹May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."**

Naomi is basically encouraging them to forget trying to come with her to Judah -- where Moabites would have been persona non grata because of their pagan religious beliefs and their status as citizens of one of Israel's worst enemies. *"It's much better that you go back to Moab and find a good husband there,"* she says. **Then she kissed them and they wept aloud ¹⁰and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."**

Now, there is an incredible irony here. As far as the average Israelite would have been concerned, these Moabites would be considered faithless and morally bankrupt people. The Jews in that time looked at Moabites the way Jews in Jesus' time looked at Samaritans. Yet, just look at the incredible faithfulness and virtue demonstrated here -- and towards a mother-in-law, of all people!!

When somebody says: *"Hey, let me tell you about my mother-in-law,"* we usually brace for some sharp-tongued complaint or tale of woe springing from the habitual pain of that relationship. I suppose it is possible that Ruth and Orpah simply had the world's greatest mother-in-law, like YOU do! Naomi's name literally means "lovable" or "delightful." Chances are, however, that Naomi wasn't perfect, and that the devotion shown by these daughters-in-law was an act of disciplined commitment instead. I'll say more about that in a moment.

But just make this mental note, if you will: It is not always the religious insider who exhibits the heart of God. Jesus made this point time and time again as he challenged the superficial religiosity of the Pharisees and held up as an example for all to follow the compassion of a Good Samaritan, the generosity of an impoverished widow, the love of a woman of ill-repute who broke an alabaster jar of perfume and anointed him for his burial.

Would God prefer it if those who kept all the religious rituals were also the greatest exemplars of genuine compassion, generosity, love, or loyalty? Does God like it when those who can say the Apostles' Creed by memory do an even better job of loving strangers and supporting broken people than the people in AA? You bet He does. But given a choice between real faithfulness and religious frosting, Jesus makes it very clear which one delights God. That thought both humbles and inspires me. How about you?

So there they are, stopped along the road. Everybody's crying. It's a moment of agonizing choice -- the sort of crucial choices that come to all of us amidst the inevitable changes and challenges of life -- the kind of choice about where our ultimate loyalties lie, the kind of choice that has the power to turn a problem-filled present into a promise-filled future.

The older woman speaks...¹¹**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? ¹²Return 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-- ¹³would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them?

Naomi's rather puzzling comment here refers to what was called "*levirate marriage*" – a social convention commanded by God in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. In this tradition a deceased man's brother was called upon to care for his widow as if he were her own husband. If Naomi could marry and have more sons, there would be hope for her dead sons' widows. But Naomi knows that she is too old for more children and even if she could have them, her daughter-in-laws would starve while waiting for them to grow up.

Let me digress here for a moment and make an observation about this whole levirate marriage tradition. I wonder, sometimes, whether we'd need a very large government at all if the people of our nation were guided by that same sort of compassion and sense of interconnectedness represented by the social laws God designed into the life of ancient Israel. I might add that this same web of interdependence and mutual support is also at the heart of the biblical vision of the Church. God's vision is that no one should ever have to go it alone in this world. To this end, someone has calculated that were every church in America to commit itself to helping ten poverty-stricken families to get on their feet, poverty could be completely eradicated in this nation.

In any event, Naomi continues... **"No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!" ¹⁴At this they wept again.** It is a heart-rending scene. It's like one of those movies where a mother is giving up her children to save them from destruction and you watch as the train or the lifeboat pulls away and the mother weeps and the children cry out with arms outstretched. It is amazing to me that Hollywood hasn't made a movie about this.

Part of the agony for Naomi is that she believes that the Lord's hand has turned against her. She assumes that the tragedy she is experiencing is a clear sign that either God is punishing her or he is brushing her pains away as insignificant to him. That wasn't true for Naomi, as it isn't true for any of you who are suffering. There's an important takeaway here. Like I said last week: LIFE is what happens when you've made other plans. The pain of life is not a sign that God has turned his hand against you; on the contrary, it's an occasion to reach out for God's hand. As we're going to see, God had NOT abandoned Naomi, as he does not abandon you.

Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye... In other words, Orpah saw the common sense in Naomi's counsel and so she kissed her mother-in-law goodbye. By the way, and speaking of common sense, I mentioned OPRAH last week. Do you know that the famous talk show maven's mother actually named her "Orpah," after this biblical character? It got misspelled on her birth certificate, and so her Mom went with it, and the rest is history. For all Oprah's many good qualities, it has always struck me as sad

that she eventually walked away from her mother's faith. **But Ruth clung to her [mother-in-law],** the Bible says. **¹⁵"Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."**

Naomi thinks of the profound bond Ruth must feel with her own religion, family, and people. Out of compassion for those natural human connections and concern for Ruth's future, Naomi says, "Go with Orpah... She's going to have a great media empire someday." OK, just kidding! **¹⁶But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.** And what follows are among the most beautiful words of COMMITMENT ever spoken from one person to another: **Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷Where 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."**

Really think about this for a moment. Ruth is willing to leave her homeland, to sacrifice her best remarriage prospects, to put herself in physical danger, out of voluntary devotion to another. Pause for a moment and notice what a total alliance of one's interests to another's that these words of Ruth imply. [#SLIDE A]She is saying: I am committed to you vocationally (where you feel called to go I'll go). I am with you domestically or daily (where you stay I'll stay). I am with you relationally (your people will be my people), I am with you spiritually (your God, will be my God), I am with you permanently (till death do us part)

They are rare indeed, but these are the kinds of COMMITMENTS that mark the very best marriages and families, and the most exemplary friendships and small group relationships. They are the sort of promises someone makes to you or you make to them in saying: "I am ALL IN for and with you." There's nothing like being at the giving or the receiving end of that kind of devotion. Have you ever committed yourself to someone like that? Could you or would you? The choice to be faithful in relationship – particularly when that requires sacrifice -- is one of the most influential of all actions we can take in this world. Even if we can't live out our commitments perfectly, devoting ourselves to standing with and serving one another is one of the most Jesus-like things we can ever do. For, HE is the one who promises: **I will never leave you nor forsake you (Heb 13:5).**

At its core and above all else, the Book of Ruth is about the fidelity of God. The Apostle Paul once observed to his protégé, Timothy: [#FULL]**If we have died with Christ, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him... if we are faithless, he remains faithful -- for he cannot deny himself. (2 Tim 2:11-13).** God's essential nature is faithfulness -- consistency and integrity with what he has promised. I pray that the knowledge and example of God's fidelity will be both a comfort and an inspiring challenge to you and me.

18When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her [to go back with Orpah]. I have this theory that a smile of pleasure spread across Naomi's face as she settled into a silent sense of wonder that with all she'd lost, with all that seemed uncertain or frightening about the future, she had been given in this remarkable daughter-in-law a love of the highest kind.

It makes me think of the story of the man who once watched two children spend hours building a sand-castle, then saw it suddenly washed away in a single moment by a huge wave. The man fully expected the children to stomp their feet and cry. To his utter amazement, however, they went dancing down the beach hand-in-hand. It was then that it hit him. At some point, everyone's castles get knocked over. What makes the difference is that some people have someone else whose hand they can hold when it does. This is why our church keeps encouraging you to join one of our small groups, if you haven't already. It is why I hope if you are going through a hard time you will also reach out for God's hand. Even when we can't feel his fingers, he is holding you. His love for us is utterly faithful and his plan completely wise.

The Bible says: **19So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" 20"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. 21I 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.**" Again, we can't blame Naomi for her feelings here. She can only see in a glass darkly at this point. But, one day, Naomi – and you and I – will see face-to-face and know the love that will not let us go.

22So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law... ..arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning. And, oh, what a harvest was waiting – as you'll see when we pick up the story next time.

Please pray with me...

Thoughts to Take With You So Far From This Series

1. The life of individuals is of immense importance to God.
2. The life of a single person or family is often essential to a far greater and more wonderful design than can be seen at the moment.
3. Every life is marked by difficult change and challenges.

4. The choices one makes in the face of such struggles can help turn the outcome.
5. The choice to be faithful in relationship – particularly when that requires sacrifice -- is the most influential of all.
6. It is not always the religious insider that is the greatest exemplar of this kind of faithfulness – even if it ought to be.
7. The pain of life is not a sign that God has turned his hand against you; on the contrary, it's an occasion to reach out for God's hand.
8. The faithfulness of God is total.