



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1279-1
Ruth 1
Mark Mitchell
August 15, 2004

Loss, Loyalty and Lament

SERIES: *Romance and Redemption*

I've never been one to read romance novels, but lately I've been reading one. It got me thinking about what makes a good romance novel. I even went to the Harlequin web site. Harlequin is the number one publisher of romance novels in the world. I found their list of the top ten things they look for when a new manuscript lands on an editor's desk:

1. *A dramatic and original opening!* Have you ever opened a novel, read the opening pages, and put it back? You probably missed out on a great story but if the first scene didn't grab you, you'll never know.

2. *A heroine we wish we could be!* If she's spoiled, cold or humorless, we won't be rooting for her to get her man. If she's warm, intelligent, and spirited, we'll put ourselves in her shoes and cheer her!

3. *A hero we wish we could meet.* He doesn't have to be a company president, but he must have instant page impact and be strong, self-confident, honorable — and sexy without even knowing it!

4. *A story line that dares to be different!* We want to be surprised and captivated by a story line that challenges all expectations.

5. *Dialogue that sparkles!* We also want to see your characters talk to each other with energy, wit, and feeling.

6. *Emotion that leaps off the page.* We want to travel on an emotional roller coaster with your characters.

7. *Sensuality that simmers!* We need to know your characters want each other...with a burning intensity.

8. *A pace that keeps us hooked until the very last page.* Twists and turns in the plot, emotional dilemmas that keep unraveling.

9. *A setting that adds color, but stays in the background.* If we want a guidebook, we'll buy one! It's the romance we're interested in.

10. *A romantic buzz that puts a smile on your faces for days!* Falling in love gives us a buzz that's better than chocolate, champagne, or winning the lottery. Your novel should capture that exhilaration.

I think that's a pretty good list. The particular romance novel that I've been reading has all of those characteristics. Believe it or not, it's a book I found in the Bible. It's the book of Ruth. Ruth may be the original romance novel; one that is just as appealing to men as it is to women. One of the best things about this book is that it's true. It actually happened! It's a story that takes place in Israel during the period of the Judges. Remember that was a very dark time in Israel's history when "every man did what was right in his own eyes." But the story of Ruth is a ray of light in a sea of darkness. It gives us a snapshot of ordinary life; one which radiates with light because we see God at work, not in what we would consider miraculous ways, but in the course of common life.

This morning I want us to look at the opening of the

story. It is indeed "a dramatic and original opening" that will grab you and not let go; one in which the main characters are plunged into tragedy and loss.

I. God's people are not exempt from experiencing tragedy and loss.

"Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. Then both Mahlon and Chilion also died, and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband" (vv. 1-5).

The writer begins by describing one family's migration from Bethlehem in Judah to Moab. This would have been about a 40 mile trek to the area east of the Dead Sea. They moved because there was a famine in the land of Judah. Most of us have never experienced famine. Perhaps we've seen pictures of children in Africa with a desperate look in their eyes — thin arms, swollen bellies, gaunt faces. Despite our technology, famine still stalks the human race. You can understand why Elimelech would move from the Promised Land to a strange place like Moab. But many believe that this was a faithless move on his part, and I tend to agree. Instead of trusting God to provide, he moved his family to a nation that historically had been at war with God's people. The Moabite religion was diametrically opposed to the worship of the true God. The Moabites worshipped Chemosh, a false god who expected the Moabites to sacrifice their children as burnt offerings in his honor. This is what he was exposing his family to.

Perhaps that's why tragedy struck. First, Elimelech dies, leaving Naomi a single mother in a foreign land. As a widow, she would have no way of providing for herself until her sons grew up and could take care of her. We don't know how much time passed, but eventually her two sons took Moabite wives, Ruth and Orpah, and they settled there for ten years. But, as if one tragedy wasn't enough, Naomi's two sons died. I can't imagine the devastation of losing one child, much less two. There is a kind of pathos behind the words in v. 5, **"...and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband."** Besides the emotional toll this must have took, there was a practical side to this as well. Now Naomi was totally helpless. There was no Social Security system or life insurance

to fall back on. You can't help but feel for Naomi. She's probably too old to marry. She doesn't even have any grandchildren! She must have been overwhelmed by grief, loneliness, fear and an utter sense of hopelessness. What would she do? What was there to live for? It must have at least crossed her mind, why don't I just give up and die?

For some of us, it may be hard to identify with Naomi. We've had a few problems, but nothing as bad as this. Our life may have even gone relatively smooth up until now. For others, you know exactly what Naomi must have felt like. You've lost a husband or a wife or a child. You've been left all alone. It doesn't have to be a death. It can be something like divorce, or an illness, or even the loss of a job. Sooner or later, we all have to deal with loss on some level. Everyone's turn comes sooner or later. God's people are not exempt. And sometimes it seems to all come at once, as it did with Naomi. We get hit with one thing and just when we think we may survive something else hits us, and then something else on top of that. Wave upon wave threaten to undo us.

Gerald Sittser is a professor at Whitworth College. About ten years ago his minivan was hit by a drunk driver and in a moment's time he lost three generations: his mother, wife and his daughter were all killed. He wrote a book called, *A Grace Disguised*, which tells about his grief. He describes his initial experience of living with the loss like this: "I felt like I was staring at the stump of a huge tree that had just been cut down in my backyard. That stump, which sat all alone, kept reminding me of the beloved tree that I had lost. I could think of nothing but that tree. Every time I looked out the window, all I could see was that stump." Some of you feel like all you can see is the stump of something beloved that has been lost. The question is, how do you live with that? Sittser says later that he discovered that "the experience of loss itself does not need to be the defining moment of our lives. Instead, the defining moment can be our response to the loss." He says, "We do not have the freedom to choose the roles we must play in life, but we can choose how we are going to play the roles we have been given."

As we read the rest of chapter one, we can see that this was true not just for Naomi but for Ruth as well. Each of these women had important choices to make in the face of their loss. In their initial responses to their loss, they teach of the choices we have to make to not just survive loss, but actually to grow through it.

II. There is a way to respond to tragedy and loss.

A. We can choose life: As a matter of fact, the first thing Naomi does is to make a choice. Look at v. 6. "Then she arose with her daughters-in-law that she might return from the land of Moab, for she had heard in the land of Moab that the LORD had visited His people in giving them food." Naomi decides to return home. The reason Naomi decides to return home is that "she heard the Lord had visited his people in giving them food." Remember, this is not a story where we see God pulling off a lot of miracles. But here we see God's hand at work in providing food. He does that, you know. He's the One who provides food for us, whether it's after a famine or

not. And Naomi hears about it. How she heard we don't know, but you get the feeling that maybe Naomi is turning a corner; maybe there are better things ahead for her.

The choice to return was an important one for Naomi. It reveals her courage; her stubborn will to live. Perhaps it even shows her faith in God. Sometimes in the midst of loss and grief and hopelessness the hardest thing to do is to do anything at all that might be a step in the direction of starting over; of receiving life and blessing again from God. Sometimes we're paralyzed by our need to hang on to the last remnants to the past. Sometimes in our depression we lack the energy and will to do anything at all. We want to just give up; to just keep counting our losses; to wallow in self-pity. I'm not saying at all we should run away from the pain. We'll see in a moment that Naomi took her pain with her. But she made a decision to live and receive from God.

We often see this in the ministry of Jesus. Before Jesus healed people, most of the time he waited for people to make a choice to come to him. Sometimes these people didn't even know they would be healed, but they made a choice to come to him. Before Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, he waited for Mary and Martha to come to him. They could have remained paralyzed in their grief, but they chose to put themselves in a position for him to do something.

We have to do the same. For you that might be a decision to see a Christian counselor. It might be a decision to just come to church or join a small group. It might be a decision to get out of bed. It might be a decision to buy yourself a new dress or go and look for a job. Whatever it is, God gives you the strength to make a choice in the direction of life.

B. We can choose to express loyal love: The second thing we can learn from these women has to do with their relationship with one another. There is something about shared suffering that knits people together and we see that here. Look at vv. 7-18.

"So she departed from the place where she was, and her two daughters-in-law with her; and they went on the way to return to the land of Judah. And Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, 'Go, return each of you to her mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May the LORD grant that you may find rest, each in the house of her husband.' Then she kissed them, and they lifted up their voices and wept. And they said to her, 'No, but we will surely return with you to your people.' But Naomi said, 'Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.' And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Then she said, 'Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' But Ruth said, 'Do not urge me to leave you or turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.

Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if anything but death parts you and me.' When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her."

When Naomi heads off for Israel, Ruth and Orpah leave with her. It was customary then to accompany a guest on the first part of their journey as a way to say goodbye – sort of like we might walk a person to their car after they visit with us. But after a while Naomi realizes these women aren't saying goodbye. Here we have some of that "sparkling dialogue" editors look for.

Naomi wants them to stay in Moab because life would be better for them there. They could still find a husband. She says, "return to your mother's house" because it was there that a marriage was arranged. She has a genuine concern for them. That's why she prays for them: "May the Lord deal kindly with you..." That word "kindly" is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*, which refers to God's steadfast, loyal love for his people. That's what she wants them to experience as they go back and start over. When they refuse to go back home, Naomi heightens her argument. She says, "Have I yet sons in my womb that they may be your husbands?" She's referring to what is known in the OT as the law of the leverite whereby a widow was to marry the brother of her deceased husband. Not only was this a way to provide for widows but it was a way to allow the name of the deceased husband to continue. The son from that union would take the name of the deceased husband. Naomi says, "All my sons are dead and I'm too old to provide any more for you to marry under the law of the leverite. Even if I got married and conceived tonight (fat chance!) would you wait for him to grow up?" It's a rather cynical way of speaking, but she has an airtight argument.

Orpah buys it and goes back to Moab. She did what was expected. But Ruth wasn't buying it. Ruth did the unexpected. She "clung" to Naomi, like a two-year-old who doesn't want to leave her mother's arms. Here is our first clue that there is something special about Ruth. Maybe she will be "a heroine we wish we could be." Naomi even tries to exert a little peer pressure: "Look at Orpah. She went back. Go with her!" She even brings a spiritual element into this: "she's gone back to her people and her gods." But Ruth refuses to budge.

Ruth's expression of loyal love to Naomi are some of the most beautiful words in all the bible. Often they're used as wedding vows, but you can see here they didn't start that way. They have to do with friendship between two women. Ruth's expressing her undying loyalty to her mother-in-law as a friend. She says she will even be buried with her which was a huge deal in that culture. She could have just said I'll stick with you as long you are

alive and then I will return to Moab. But Ruth is making a permanent break with her past. Why would she do that? I believe ultimately this was an expression of loyalty to God. Notice she says, "your God will be my God." She had learned of this God from Naomi. She might have thought, "Why would I want your God? Look what he's done for you!" But she had come to believe in him and now her faith was expressed in being willing to leave all behind. Don't forget that Ruth had taken some shots too. She had lost a husband. She had been childless throughout her marriage. But she too expresses unusual faith and loyalty.

If we are going to survive these times of loss, we have

to learn this kind of deep loyalty to one another. We have to make a choice to look out for each other's interest and cling to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Our tendency might be to isolate ourselves, but we need to extend ourselves to each other. The church of Jesus Christ should be a place where we demonstrate that it is possible to have non-sexual, nonromantic relationships of great depth and commitment. We live in a rootless, mobile, transient society. Neighborhoods and workplaces are in constant flux. We rarely get to know our neighbors. Our workplaces are places of cutthroat competition. There are few arenas for friendship to blossom. Sex offers a momentary sense of deep connection without the commitment, so people often exchange that for genuine relationships. But here in the book of Ruth is a non-sexual relationship of extraordinary commitment between two single women. There are people in our society who for one reason or another will never marry, but does that exclude them from experiencing loyal and intimate love? If you're single, I challenge you to forge this kind of relationship. You may have felt like you've been scratched from the guest list when it comes to having deep and intimate friendship, but that's a lie. Look around you. Is there a Ruth to look out for? Is there a Naomi to cling to?

D. We can choose to lament our pain: So off they go. Ruth and Naomi make the treacherous journey across the mountains and into the town of Bethlehem. We read of their arrival in vv. 19-21.

"So they both went until they came to Bethlehem. And when they had come to Bethlehem, all the city was stirred because of them, and the women said, 'Is this Naomi?' She said to them, 'Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the LORD has witnessed against me and the Almighty has afflicted me?'"

Here we have "emotion that leaps off the page." We can imagine that news of Naomi's arrival passed from house to house and the whole town buzzed with excitement. The women of the town whisper to one another, "Is this Naomi?" They weren't mocking her. I'm sure they were glad to see her after 20 years. But we can hear the disbelief in their voices. We can only guess what story Naomi's face told. She had left with a husband and two sons, but now she returns with no one but a Moabite woman. And so Naomi responds with a bitter complaint. Naomi means "pleasant" while Mara means "bitter." She says Mara fits me so much better. And then she attributes all her suffering to the hand of God. She says "the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me...I went out full but the Lord has brought me back empty."

This is what you might call a complaint or a lament. We're not too comfortable with this. What would you do if someone in your small group said this, "God has dealt bitterly with me." How would you respond? We might feel like Naomi was a very unspiritual woman to talk this way. But this wasn't the first or last time one of God's people lodged a complaint. She is in good company here: Jeremiah, Job, Moses, David all expressed their complaints to God. I believe God appreciated the honesty. Often we think God will be offended by our questions and complaints, but when you're intimate

with someone and you've trusted someone, it's normal to express your most personal feelings. This only crosses over into sin when we become resentful of God or when we no longer trust him with our lives. In an almost paradoxical way, our choice to face and lament the pain as Naomi does here is necessary before we can really experience joy again.

In the midst of his grief, Gerald Sittser had a dream of a setting sun. He was frantically running westward towards it, trying to catch it and remain in its light. But he was losing the race. The sun was beating him to the horizon and was soon gone. He stopped running and glanced over his shoulder towards the east and saw the darkness closing in on him. He was terrified by it. He wanted to keep running towards the sun but he just collapsed in despair. But later he was reminded that, if you follow the path on a globe, east and west eventually meet up. Someone told him the quickest way to reach the setting sun is not to run west towards it, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until you come to the sunrise. He writes, "I discovered in that moment that I had the power to choose the direction my life would head... Since I knew that the darkness was inevitable and unavoidable, I decided from that point on to walk into the darkness rather than try to outrun it...to allow myself to be transformed by my suffering rather than to think I could somehow avoid it." That's what Naomi chooses to do here. She doesn't deny her pain; she walks into it; she allows herself to be transformed by it. That's what we can choose as well.

Part of the reason she complained to God was she had a strong belief that God was in charge of all of life. She says "the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me...the Lord has brought me back empty." What happened to her was not random. It felt random. It always feels random. Why me? But, like Job, she chose to believe that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Naomi believed that God was in charge. What she had a hard time seeing, though, was that God was at work in ALL THINGS both for her good and his glory. The hand of the Lord wasn't against her; it seemed that way, but the fact is, he loved her, and he would use even this for her greater blessing. That's what Naomi had yet to learn. Notice she says, "I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty." But look at v. 22. **"So Naomi returned, and with her Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, who returned from the land of Moab. And they came to Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest."** Had she really come back empty handed? No! She had come back with this stubbornly faithful friend, Ruth, the Moabites, whose loyalty would prove to a greater blessing than Naomi could ever imagine. Not only that, it was the beginning of the barley harvest. God was providing for his people.

CONCLUSION

In the midst of our losses, it's an act of faith to believe that God is still at work and his ultimate aim is to bless us. All we can see is the loss; all we can feel is the pain; but if we open our eyes there may be a loyal friend like Ruth, or even a barley harvest. Maybe the most important choice we can make is to believe that.

Most of the time, life is like the tangled threads on the back of a tapestry; it seems to us a tangle of unrelated colors, loose ends, and unraveled knots. It's only when we turn the tapestry over and look at the other side that those same threads clearly spell out the words, "God is love." Most of the time we cannot see the other side, but faith in God's word assures us there is another side, and that in his love, even our losses have meaning.