

*From Loss to Love*

The Book of Ruth

Whitefish UMC

November 8, 2009

- † “I learned, slowly, that if you don’t look at the world with perfect vision, you’re bound to get yourself cooked.” So begins The Book of Ruth—no, not the biblical book from which Becky just read, but a novel by Jane Hamilton, published about 20 years ago.
- † Selected as one of Oprah’s first book club books, the more contemporary Book of Ruth takes place in a small town named Honey Creek. Pegged as a loser in a small town family that doesn’t have much going for it in the first place, Ruth Dahl grows up in the shadow of her genius brother, trying to survive in a world of poverty and hardship.
- † Made into a “Lifetime” movie a few years ago, Jane Hamilton’s book of Ruth is perhaps a reaction to the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi. For Ruth Dahl, stuck with low self-esteem, a low-paying job, and a mentally-ill husband, cleaves to her half-crazy mother, May.
- † The trouble is, May is the source of much of Ruth’s poor self-image in the first place. May has constantly compared her to her brilliant brother and found her lacking. Their relationship is one of classic co-dependence that is unhealthy and damaging.
- † What a stark contrast to the relationship between the biblical Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. I wish I could ask the author Jane Hamilton what she had in mind in titling her book after the biblical

one. Sadly, her portrayal of small-town Christians, along with Ruth's witless pastor, isn't sympathetic at all.

- † For both Ruth's—the biblical and the contemporary—life is interrupted by tragedy. And we can relate. As we focus on our scripture for today, we find three women—Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth—dealing with the death of three husbands and no means of support.
- † Our reading this morning is from the lectionary but it is only a portion of the very short Book of Ruth from the Hebrew Scriptures. A little background to set the stage: A long time ago, even before there were kings of Israel, a woman of Bethlehem, Naomi, and her husband left their hometown during a famine to live in the land of Moab where they could find food. Their sons married Moabite women, but tragedy struck the family when the father and both sons died. The three widows were bereft with no husbands to look after them, and Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem. At first, the daughters-in-law went with her, but on the road, Naomi urged them to go home and build new futures for themselves by finding new husbands. One woman, Orpah, wept but turned back. Ruth, however, has been remembered down through the ages not only for her devotion to Naomi but for her exquisitely beautiful words in expressing it: "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; 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!"
- † Naomi gives in and lets Ruth return with her, but she is bitter, bitter, bitter, and full of despair. She even tells the women back home to call

her "Mara," which means bitter. But Ruth loves Naomi anyway, and looks after her needs. Now Naomi has an in-law, Boaz, a cousin of her dead husband, and he is a rich landowner. Ruth goes out with the other women into the fields Boaz owns and "gleans," following the harvesters and taking the grain they leave behind. Boaz notices Ruth working hard, and makes special arrangements for these distant relatives to have extra grain.

- † It's a crossover moment in time, says Sister Joan Chittister, one of our best contemporary spiritual writers. "It's the kind of moment that leads these women—leads everyone, perhaps—to God's new time.
- † Moments of great loss—the loss of a child, a marriage, a job, a parent, a dream—these moments throw a person back on internal resources, with little in the way of external resources to barter. At times like these, money, social connections, education—seem to matter little.
- † At that point it is what we have inside ourselves at times of loss that will have to count. It is faith in the ultimate logic and purpose of God in life that is the only real resource we have to draw from at times like this. So Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah have a lot to teach us today.
- † Like everyone ever born who goes through sudden, defining loss of any kind, these women find themselves faced with the question: Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was?
- † Like the rest of us for whom the very foundations of our lives are given to shifting from day to day, there are no miracles in sight to save them, no angels on the road to point the way. Nothing.
- † Everything they had, everything they ever thought they wanted, is gone. Now they have only themselves on which to depend, only the spirit of God to lead them on through a world that has little place for

- them at all once motherhood ends, or there is no man to support them, or there is no institution to define them, or there is no one and nothing whose need makes their existence legitimate.
- † Loss, loss of any kind—rejection, abandonment, divorce, death—is a shocking, numbing, grey thing that at the outset, at least, freezes the heart and slows the mind. Loss changes life at its very root—irrevocably. What was once the center of life—the person, position, title, the plan, the lifestyle—is no more.
  - † Life after loss is never the same again. What we have known, almost unconsciously, often for years, to be good, familiar, certain—is gone, snatched away. What we once took for granted shifts and tilts and weakens. Emptiness becomes our companion, and often God becomes more a rumor or a memory than a fact.
  - † For many of us, even our spiritual certainties fade. Where is God now when we are left in this sea of disorientation? Where is the will of God for us in loss? Often we become angry with God, feeling betrayed and foolish by our confident faith. We rage and rail at God. Or worse, we turn away from God completely.
  - † But here is the divine paradox: loss, once it is absorbed and examined, can be a precious gift. Although it's painful, to be sure, that we cannot be what we were before, we can be, must be, something new. When we release ourselves into the well of ourselves, we find more of God in us.
  - † In other words, there is more of God in us to be discovered in the emptiness than we have ever known in the fullness.
  - † For loss gives us spiritual lessons that can't be figured out by any other means. We learn, just when we think we have nothing, that

what we still do have is ourselves, and the divine image that is a blueprint for our life. We have, deep down inside us what no one can take away—the self that God created in us and that brought us to this point—and more.

- † We have gifts of God in abundance, never before noticed, never touched, perhaps, but just a breath in us nevertheless and waiting to be tapped. And sometimes only loss releases the wealth of the accumulated self. Sometimes only loss requires the concentration of spirit that brings us to our best.
- † Left without the security of the past, we are forced to stand alone, find inside ourselves the steel of spirit it takes to survive the unbearable, to trust that the God who made us for life stands by, even at what feels like the boundaries of death.
- † Joan Chittister uses a phrase, “the grace of loss.” If ever there was a paradox, here’s one. For those of us who have howled in anger and pain because of the emptiness left when we lose someone or some part of our life that we love, it’s hard to imagine how loss can bring grace.
- † And yet even this week, I’ve listened to sad stories of grief and even betrayal that have led to new insights of gratitude and appreciation for moments of grace never before known, except in the loss. How is that possible?
- † One aspect of the grace of lost is grief; the other, reassessment of the past. Both are essential. Unless we allow ourselves to fully grieve the loss, to admit its effects on our own lives, our own souls, we can’t make good decisions in the future.
- † And unless we begin to reassess the past, we can’t know who we were in whole before we became the person, the self, we’ve lost. We will

never know the full measure of what we have to bring to the rest of life.

- † Finding the right timing is key. If we stay in grief, it can paralyze us. But too soon a rush to reassessment can abort the process of readiness for the future. Only grieving can release us from grief. Grief takes time—time to deal with the anger that comes along with loss.
- † It takes time to regain perspective, and to see ourselves separate from what we've lost. It takes time to see the hand of God in the depths of darkness. It's only when we have celebrated the gift of what we've lost that we are really ready to move on with life, to move beyond what has been to what can be, to let go.
- † So grief has its place in life. It consecrates the past to its place in memory. The measure of the pain loss gives is the measure of the love we've had, in many cases. But grief does more: it also frees us for the future by giving resolution to the past.
- † When we face our loss honestly, we can ask what it is in us that lies unfinished and begging to be done if the will of God is ever to be completed in us. What parts of ourselves have we neglected because of our past focus?
- † The story of Ruth and Naomi is just such a story of both grief and reassessment, along with the grace of loss. Naomi did what we all need to do, one way or another, at a time of loss. Naomi picked up her life, out of necessity to be sure, and went back to Bethlehem, not so much to find refuge in a family that was not there, but to be what she herself needed to be at that time: a Hebrew, a Judean, an independent woman in the bosom of a culture she had lost years ago before its time.

- † In her love for her daughters-in-law, a new life for herself was birthed. Naomi went back to become herself again by putting the welfare of her daughter in law Ruth first, so that she would have a future. Her love, though, inspires the love that will turn both Naomi and Ruth's future into great blessing.
- † On the lonely and dusty road to Bethlehem, Ruth makes a stand upon which the story turns. What a surprise! The pagan foreign daughter-in-law mirrors a not-be-deterred love and commitment that remind us of God's own love for us.
- † And through that love will be born a new grandson, who will become the grandfather of David, the greatest king in the history of Israel! Of course we Christians believe that out of that lineage will be born Jesus, the Messiah.
- † No wonder the biblical Book of Ruth is at the top of the favorite bible stories. It has a happy ending, and we all want one of those. But there are times when we experience such intense suffering and pain that we feel like Christ on the cross. We want to yell "My God, hast thou forsaken me?"
- † Sometimes it takes the love of a community and of our friends, family, church to remind us that God has prepared a holy place for us. And when we are too sad, too numb, too angry to pray, that's when our friends and church must pray FOR us, in our place. That's why we knit prayer shawls, chemo caps, prayer quilts. Just this past week, someone said to me: "I am too angry at God to pray." "Then I will pray in your place," I said. And tears of relief flowed.

† As if with this message in mind, I received this note from Joanna in affirmation of how God works to prepare this holy place even in times of loss. With Joanna's permission, I'll share it with you now:

*Yesterday as I worked in my studio, an old friend stopped in. I met her MANY years ago, about my age and dealing with mental depression, becoming more and more homeless and now living with her dogs in her small, old fashioned motor home. She has always loved my work and way back then I would feel guilty about taking her money when her tales of financial disaster went on and on ~ however she always wanted my REALLY SPECIAL PIECES and I could not give them away after all!! I always invite her to stop in and chat and have resisted any urge to caretake her.....not seen her in a long while. She looked really good yesterday and wanted to know if i had any place or need for an excess of bubble wrap that she had accumulated from moving stuff out of storage and cleaning out. I welcomed her to stop in and drop it off anytime. She returned shortly and also shared a story of a young couple she was housesitting for, whom I know well, about how their 5 yr. old son was getting treatment in Seattle for radical seizures. Immediately concerned, I glanced over my shelf to see if there were an appropriate piece i could send with her that would express hope for strength and healing and comfort. She disappeared out to her van and came back inside, to my amazement, and like a dog following a vision of raw steak, my eyes almost popped out of my head as i saw that under her arm she was carrying one of my most beloved pieces of pottery from MANY years ago! It was a planter with funky attachments and raindrops and in a style that my inside heart has been longing to revisit and work through again! (She asked, since she no longer had any space or real need for a planter, if she could trade it in for a piece to give to this young couple) I*

*was SO caught off guard with this vision i nearly cried for joy. I gave her JUST the right piece and I welcomed a piece of pottery back home, just a syllable from God of sacred direction. It was is if this once lump of clay had been in the presence of God and carried some inner light to touch me again. I look at it now as nothing of MY creation, but as what a prayer looks like.*

*I never would ever have imagined that this nearly homeless woman might be the tool of sacred affirmation, in just the voice that I needed to hear and see! Even though I no longer use a lot of recognizable syllables or language in my prayers, I know that sacred communication is going on! What a day!"*

† What a day indeed! May we each keep our eyes wide open, even through the tears of our lives, to the grace of loss. When the time is right, may we be like Naomi and Ruth, Boaz and their community of gleaners of God's gifts. For there is more than enough love for each of us, even when and because it is birthed out of loss.

† Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

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[www.csec.org](http://www.csec.org)

Kate Huey, "Weekly Seeds,"

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