

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost- October 29, 2023

Scripture lesson: Ruth 1:1-18

## HIDDEN GRACE

Today in beginning to listen for God's word from the book of Ruth, I'd also like to offer words from two other sources. The first is William Shakespeare in his play, *Macbeth*, Act 4, Scene 3. McDuff says, "Every morn, new widows howl, new orphans cry, and new sorrows strike heaven on the face."

Every loss, heartache, and sorrow can make us feel like crying out to God, "You have turned against us!" The book of Ruth knows that feeling well and gives strong voice to it.

The other source is C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Great Divorce*. One of its characters, George MacDonald, says, "Ah, the Saved . . . what happens to them is best described as the opposite of a mirage. What seemed, when they entered it, to be the vale of misery turns out, when they look back, to have been a well; and where present experience saw only salt deserts memory truthfully records that the pools were full of water."

Together those two sources echo the voice of Ruth. The biblical book that bears her name embraces the fact that our howling laments to God are honest and necessary. But it also dares us to go deeper to see and trust that in the middle of our sufferings God is always at work to create blessing.

Ruth, chapter 1, tells of hardship and death in Naomi's family. She and her husband, Elimelech are from Bethlehem in Judah. Ironically, their town's name means "place of bread", but there's a severe famine in their land and there is no bread.

To secure food, Naomi, Elimelech, and their sons, Mahlon and Chilion leave Judah for Moab. Even though people have migrated for centuries for reasons like that, it's hard to imagine how difficult it is unless you've done it yourself. In order to survive, you move to a foreign land where everyone's a stranger who speaks a different language and practices unfamiliar customs. How hard must that be?

Those difficulties are only compounded for Naomi and her family. Once they're in Moab, Elimelech suddenly gets sick and dies. This devastates the family, but they press on. Mahlon and Chilion marry Moabite women, and apparently find sufficient work. For her part, Naomi faces the challenge of incorporating foreign daughters-in-law into her family. That's the way it has to be when you've moved into their land.

But soon, things turn even worse. Mahlon and Chilion both die, so that Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, are the only ones left in the family. As widows, they're thrown to the bottom of Moabite society where their options are extremely limited.

In their time and place, a widow can go back to live with her parents, but Naomi can't do that because her parents have died. A widow can remarry and try to start a new family, but Naomi can't do that because she's too old to bear children. A widow can live off the support of her adult children but Naomi can't do that, either, because all of her children have died as well. The only option left to her is to beg.

She decides to do that back in her hometown of Bethlehem, since the famine there has ended. But she returns with a battered heart, feeling that God has turned harshly against her. In Hebrew, her name means “sweet” and the name, Mara, means “bitter”. So, when she returns to Bethlehem, Naomi tells the women there: “Don’t call me Naomi anymore. Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.”

In truth, there’s a lot more going on for Naomi than she can see. God is working behind the scenes to bring great blessing to her. It doesn’t come through a special dream or a dramatic answer to prayer or from a splashy and miraculous intervention. In the book of Ruth, God works with hidden grace to bless Naomi in the midst of her sufferings in ways that she never expects and doesn’t realize until much later. God blesses her with and through Ruth, her Moabite daughter-in-law whom Naomi actually tries to talk into *staying behind* in Moab.

When Naomi’s ready to return to Bethlehem, she says to both Ruth and Orpah, “Turn back, my daughters. There’s no good reason for you to go with me.” She knows that the prospects for her daughters-in-law as young widows are much better if they stay behind in their Moabite homeland rather than become foreigners in a new land where their only tie would be to a mother-in-law who begs.

Orpah eventually decides to follow Naomi’s advice, but Ruth steadfastly refuses it. She stands by Naomi with these famous words, “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 . . . if even death parts me from you” (1:17-18).

We come to see how impressive Ruth’s decision is when we learn what she has knowingly gotten herself into. She and Naomi both understand that the chances are strong that if Ruth moves to Bethlehem the rest of her life will be lived in widowhood, childlessness, poverty and probably worse. When Naomi, Elimelech, and their sons had moved to Moab it was because, like most immigrants, they expected life in a new land to be better for them. But for Ruth that is *not* the case. She does not anticipate a better life in Israel, but only a worse one. She expects to be poor and widely rejected. She knows as well that the rejection will come with a constant threat of violence against her. Why is that?

She’s a Moabite and Israel considers Moab to be one of its worst enemies. The Moabites are descendants from Sodom, and as such, they’ve long been considered especially wicked by the people of Israel. The Moabites also have a history of trying to oppress Israel whenever they’ve had the chance, so animosity towards Moab runs *very* high in Judah. When Ruth moves there, she’ll not only be a foreign widow whose only tie is to a beggar mother-in-law; she’ll also be a hated foreigner whose people are utterly despised by the people that she’ll live among.

As their story then unfolds in chapter 2, Ruth and Naomi are settled in Judah but, given their plight as beggars, they’re in dire need of food. Ruth dares to glean from a field that she can only hope belongs to someone who won’t mistreat her. It turns out, unexpectedly, to belong to Boaz who is a kinsman of Naomi’s deceased husband, Elimelech.

Boaz has been impressed by what he has heard of Ruth’s love for and devotion to her mother-in-law. With grateful admiration he gladly lets her glean from his field. At the same time, he stresses to her that she must always glean *only* from his fields.

He can make sure that *his* men won’t harass or assault her, but if she goes into a field that belongs to someone else, she’ll be strictly on her own. Boaz, Naomi, and Ruth all realize that

outside of the protection that Boaz can provide on his land, Ruth will be a prime target for abuse, rape, and even murder. Ruth has known this from the start, yet still has chosen to move to Bethlehem with Naomi. She has done this out of faithful love for her mother-in-law, pure and simple.

It takes a long time for Naomi to see and appreciate what a great gift Ruth is to her. When she first goes back to Bethlehem, she says to the women there, “The Lord has brought me back empty.” And yet, right there under her nose is Ruth, her daughter-in-law who is so selflessly devoted to her. Even Ruth must sometimes wonder, “Dear mother-in-law, am I nothing?”

It seems so, because it appears that Naomi can focus only on the fact that she no longer has men in her life to carry on her family’s name. In her time and place that’s such a huge deal that it looks like the only thing Naomi can think of when she reflects on her life. In the bigger picture as she sees it, Ruth *is* next to nothing.

Yet as their story continues, we learn that before long Boaz marries Ruth. Ruth bears a son to them named Obed. Obed becomes the father of Jesse, and Jesse becomes the father of David. Later on, beyond the book of Ruth, Scripture tells us that David becomes Israel’s greatest king, and from David’s line, Jesus is born.

In other words, in the bigger picture that the Bible sees Naomi is brought through Ruth into the lineage of kings and of the Messiah. For her part, Naomi can’t even begin to imagine such a possibility. Despite Ruth’s faithful and loving presence at her side, she still can only think, “The Lord has dealt bitterly with me.”

But through Ruth, God is at work with hidden grace in the middle of Naomi’s sufferings to bring her great blessing. Along the way, Naomi can’t see it, because like most of us, she has a particular agenda for her life. To trust that God is for her, she thinks that her life must go a certain way.

It should not include a forced migration because of famine. It should not include early loss of her husband and sons that reduces her to begging. Those expectations, which seem perfectly reasonable to me, blind her to the best gift that God indeed has given to her- namely, the faithful love of her daughter-in-law Ruth.

That’s one of the main reasons why the Bible’s big picture is often so challenging to grasp. It keeps highlighting a God who’s at work to bless us through people and situations that we usually expect nothing from- for example, a widowed daughter-in-law from a hated land, a young shepherd boy with a slingshot against a giant warrior in heavy armor, a baby born in a manger to poor Jewish parents in a backwater town, and a man beaten half to death who’s nailed to a cross.

At first sight, all of these seem caught up, as C.S. Lewis put it, in a vale of misery in a salted desert. Who can instead find in them a fresh well of God’s presence? Who can see in them pools where God is stirring to bring us blessing in the middle of our sufferings? Certainly not me. Definitely not me, without a major retraining of my eyes.

Which is what the Bible aims to do- retrain our sight so that we can see God at work with hidden grace behind the scenes to create blessing for us. It’s blessing that comes to us most often through *faithful love* like that of Ruth, and with the help of her friends, Naomi finally comes to see this.

In Ruth, chapter 4, they say to her, “(Y)our daughter-in-law who loves you . . . is more to you than seven sons (verse 15).” This is *the highest possible approval and affirmation that they can give to Naomi’s situation and to Ruth’s place in it*. How is that?

In the Bible, the number 7 usually symbolizes perfection. In the society of Ruth’s and Naomi’s time, continuing your family line is seen as so utterly important that sons are considered THE most valuable gift that you could ever get. Not only to have sons, but to have *seven* sons is therefore the best that you could possibly hope for. It would mean that life is going completely your way, that it’s turning out perfectly, that it simply could not get any better.

Yet in saying what they do, Naomi’s friends insist that with the selfless love and devotion that Ruth gives to her, Naomi’s life *is* better than that. They say that to receive love like Ruth’s *truly* is the most valuable gift of all. Furthermore, as the greatest of blessings, it has come to Naomi from a completely unexpected source- from a widowed daughter-in-law who is an outsider to Israel, and even more incredibly, from the hated and wicked people of Moab.

We try to imagine that and try to take it to heart. God has been at work behind the scenes amid Naomi’s suffering to bring her extraordinary blessing through hidden, unexpected, and amazing grace.

That’s the thrust of God’s word to us in the Bible, as a whole. It culminates for us in Jesus, God in our flesh, the boy from Naomi’s family line. Ruth’s story points us to him. His selfless love and devotion are God’s selfless love and devotion to us and for everyone. Like with Ruth, his blessing comes to us in ways far outside of our usual expectation.

Ruth had freely left her homeland. She had willingly become an outsider. She risked complete rejection and the threat of deadly violence against her, but said to Naomi, “Only death will part me from you.”

Jesus, God in our flesh, freely leaves his heavenly homeland. He willingly becomes an outsider as one of us. He risks complete rejection and the threat of deadly violence against him, but says to all of us, “Not even death will part me from you.”

As St. Paul put it in his letter to the Romans, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . . No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us; for I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor demons, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord” (8:35, 37-39).

Are any of us suffering now- you, me, each of us as individuals? Are all of you together, as the people of this church, now facing times that are uniquely challenging and difficult? Yes, both may well be, but here we are remembering Ruth. And here we are, even more, remembering Jesus.

With them in mind and at heart, our eyes are retrained. With biblical insight, we’re able to keep looking for God at work behind the scenes. With our own faithful love for God and each other, we’re able to keep trusting that with hidden but amazing grace God working to bring us blessing even in the middle of our most challenging and difficult times.

For that, we give joyous and heartfelt thanks. For that, we say hallelujah, praise God, and amen!