

“Tenacious Grace”

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

One of the most challenging aspects of the current COVID-19 pandemic is the impact of being separated from the people we love. While we can understand the importance of social distancing and remaining isolated in order to lessen the spread of the virus, the inability to gather together with family and friends has highlighted the central reality that human beings are by our very nature social creatures. This has been especially difficult at times of death when our instinctual need to be together to offer our loving presence and comforting support was not possible. The gift of presence – even when words fail us – if one of the greatest gifts we can offer persons who find themselves walking through that dark and dreaded “valley of the shadow of death.”

- “Can anyone know how much his or her presence means in such a crisis? Words are barely heard and soon forgotten. But the *presence* of friends – bringing their love and sorrow, listening to ours. The memory of their coming – their faces, their tears, their embrace – is etched in our minds forever. Remembering is such a gift. As the months turn into years, remembering does bring back deep sorrow, but it also recalls for us that *presence when we need it most*. It continues to be for us the *body of Christ*.” - Corinne Chilstrom, *Andrew, You Died Too Soon*.

The challenge of being separated from people who love and support us at the hour of death is the setting of the book of Ruth, one of the most powerful stories in the Bible. The story is set in Bethlehem “*in the days when the judges ruled, [when] there was a famine in the land*” (Ruth 1:1), which compels a man from the city to take his wife and two sons and relocate to “*the country of Moab*.” The author identifies this family as “*Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah*,” descendants of a woman named Ephrath who founded Bethlehem, “*the house of bread*” (1 Chronicles 2:19-20). In spite of the city’s name, there is no bread in Bethlehem due to the famine, so Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and sons Mahlon and Chilion relocate to Moab, a traditional enemy of Israel (“*No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD.*” – Deuteronomy 23:3). While there is no report of any animosity directed toward Elimelech and his family when they arrive in Moab, their stay in this nation is marked by unspeakable tragedy: Elimelech dies suddenly, leaving his wife Naomi widowed and her two sons fatherless. The sons meet and marry two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth; but after ten years of marriage, both sons of Naomi die, “*so that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband.*” (1:5).

Hearing that the famine in Bethlehem had ended as “*the LORD had had consideration for his people and given them food*” (1:6), Naomi decides to return to her homeland, accompanied by her two Moabite daughters-in-law. Along the way, Naomi encourages these widowed women to return to their homeland, praying “*may the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me.*” (1:8). The word translated “*kindly*” is *hesed*, a Hebrew word that describes an essential part of the nature of God, frequently used to describe God’s acts of unmerited grace and mercy: “*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:22-23). Naomi clearly thinks that the Lord’s *hesed* toward Orpah and Ruth should provide them with

“security” or “rest” in the form of new husbands among their own people. She persists in this belief even when the younger women say that they would rather return to Bethlehem with Naomi, coming up with a series of arguments meant to persuade them that they will be better off going back to their own mothers’ homes:

- “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me.” – 1:11-13.

Naomi’s logic is based on the customary practice known as “levirate marriage” that is rooted in the teaching of the Torah that *“when brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go into her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her”* (Deuteronomy 25:5). Naomi seems to assume that if she had other living sons, they might have married their brothers’ widows and thus provided them with the “security” they needed. She therefore encourages them to “turn back,” to return to Moab where they might find husbands among their own people.

The daughters-in-law respond by weeping in unison; but then they become individuals who choose different paths. Orpah obeys Naomi by kissing her mother-in-law and disappearing from the story, probably returning to Moab. Unlike Orpah, Ruth is not persuaded by Naomi’s argument; instead, she *“clung to her.”* Naomi tries to encourage Ruth to follow Orpah (*“See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.”* – 1:15), but Ruth refuses to leave. Instead, she responds with words that have overtones of indignation that English translations fail to capture:

- “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 will 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!” – 1:16-17.

Ruth is indignant because she believes Naomi is urging her to abandon her present loyalties and to turn her back on previous commitments. Ruth has already entrusted herself to the LORD, the God of Israel, by whom she swears; she has already committed herself to the family into which she has married. These firm and present loyalties explain Ruth’s determination to “cling” to Naomi, and her indignation at being asked to return to her family of origin.

- “In effect, Ruth says, ‘Your God *is* my God, and your people *are* my people; *therefore*, where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. And it makes me angry when you urge me to abandon these commitments!’ – Kathleen Robertson Farmer.

Ruth’s oath assumes that the LORD is the one who reads the intentions of the heart and punishes lies. According to Numbers 30:9, *“every vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, by which she has bound herself, shall be binding upon her.”* Naomi appears to recognize this as well as seeing that any further argument with her daughter-in-law would be futile: *“When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.”* (1:18).

Ruth's tenacity in refusing to obey Naomi's request that she return to her homeland becomes the basis for the book of Ruth's remarkable story of how this outsider, a representative of a group that had been refused entry into "the assembly of the LORD," becomes the agent or tool God uses to bring about the redemption of both Naomi and the entire people of Israel: *"And so a tale of extraordinary compassion and generosity, including a non-Israelite at its center, becomes the foundation of a family of vast importance for Christians and Jews alike."* (*Women of the Bible*). As the story unfolds, she meets *"a kinsman on [Naomi's] husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz"* (2:1). Boaz at first shows kindness to Ruth, having been told by a servant that she is *"the Moabite who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab"* (2:6). Boaz allows the young widow to glean the wheat from his fields in accordance with the commandment that *"when you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings."* (Deuteronomy 24:19). The relationship between Ruth and Boaz develops into a personal one that leads to marriage and the birth of a son; this birth results in a hymn of praise sung by the women of Bethlehem to Naomi, who proclaim *"Blessed is the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him."* (4:14-15). The son is named Obed; and the book of Ruth ends with a genealogy which reports that Obed *"became the father of Jesse, the father of David"* (4:17). This genealogy is also found at the beginning of the Gospel According to Matthew, *"the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham"* among whose ancestors are *"Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David"* (Matthew 1:1, 5-6). It is through Ruth, an outsider who refuses to obey her mother-in-law's desire for her to return to her homeland, that God fulfills the covenant promise made to Abraham that *"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12:3).

- *"Thus, a redemptive reading of Ruth will assume that the story is primarily concerned with the faithfulness of God rather than the faithfulness of the people of God. In Ruth, redemption is based on grace, not merit. Redemption is not a reward given to Naomi because of her exemplary behavior. God chooses to redeem those who seem to have done little to deserve redemption. And God chooses to use those who seem unqualified according to human standards of judgment to accomplish God's purposes for the world. The admirability of the 'other' in the story (be they Samaritan or Moabite) should serve primarily to convict us in our repeated failures to recognize the despised 'other' as an agent of God's redemptive activity in the world."* – Robertson Farmer.

Ruth is both an instrument through which God's redemptive will is accomplished and the embodiment of God's *hesed*, the steadfast, unmerited, tenacious love of God that is faithful even when God's people are faithless, that refuses to give up on God's people even when the people have turned their backs on God. Her refusal to turn away from Naomi in her mother-in-law's time of grief is an act of this steadfast love that is not based on social norm or familial obligations. Ruth's love for Naomi is that love that will not let go of us, the love that abides with us always, the love that *"bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."* (1 Corinthians 13:7). Ruth's tenacious love toward Naomi is the tenacious grace that refuses to let go of us, the steadfast love of God who *"proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8), the love that is "so amazing, so divine" because even *"if we are faithless, God remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself."* (2 Timothy 2:13). As Naomi's bitterness is transformed into joy through the tenaciously gracious presence of Ruth, we are also called to be instruments of such grace when we embrace those shrouded in grief like Naomi with the compassionate, steadfast love of the Lord.

- “When you feel his merciful embrace, when you let yourself be embraced, when you are moved – that’s when life can change, because that’s when we try to respond to the immense and unexpected gift of grace, a gift that is so overabundant it may seem ‘unfair’ in our eyes ... Only he who has been touched and caressed by the tenderness of his mercy really knows the Lord.” – Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy*.

The distancing that has been necessitated by the current pandemic has reinforced in us the necessity of human touch, of our interconnectedness as human beings. It has reminded us of how important it is to be present with each other in times of joy and especially in times of sorrow. We will never again take for granted the blessing that we both give and receive by being present for each other, embodying God’s gracious love that never lets us go, that abides with us always, that gives us “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow” as Ruth’s presence became the means of redemption for both Naomi and all God’s people.

- “Later, when we were once again able to function, they gave us a list of people to thank. They had carried the load for us, gotten others to help when we weren’t able to help ourselves. Although the burden of sorrow was heavy, we didn’t have to bear it alone. We began to understand more than ever before what Paul meant when he wrote, ‘Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.’ (Galatians 6:2).” – Chilstrom.

“*Where you go, I will go...*” – Ruth’s tenacity became a means of grace through which Naomi would eventually experience new birth and hope. May God continue to use us, especially in these uncertain times, as instruments of that tenacious grace that assures us that “*neither death, nor life, 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.*” (Romans 8:38-39).

Amen.