

This story of the connection between Naomi and her daughter-in-laws involves grieving and monumental loss. At the center of that grief is Naomi, who has lost everything. She has lost both husband and children, and, as a consequence of those losses, has everything else in her life taken away...even her hope. Her only remaining possessions seem to be bitterness and despair, and they are in abundant supply. These women are vulnerable. Without male protectors and breadwinners they possessed very limited resources, indeed. Naomi especially, since she was more elderly, would be hard put to care for her even most basic needs.

In fact, all that Naomi can see is what she has lost. She may even view herself through that lens. She likely does not value herself as a person in her own right for she mourns all that has been lost. But Ruth offers unconditional and unreserved love to Naomi. It is both a promise and a gift.

Jessica Tate puts it this way:

“At the end of Chapter 1, we are left with Naomi’s emptiness. This is where WE so often find ourselves—with a scary diagnosis, a relationship crumbling, the loss of a job, the death of a loved one. We find ourselves in these empty spaces, uncertain of the end of the story. We do not know how, or if, our fortunes, our security, our confidence, our hope will be restored. We are left with simply a promise—a promise that we are not alone. It is a promise that finds incarnation in Ruth. Ruth will cling to Naomi no matter what. She will be with her wherever she goes, wherever she lives, wherever she dies. The text leaves us unsure of how the story wraps up, but we are confident that Naomi does not face her emptiness alone. Ruth clings to her, refusing to let her go. That is God’s promise to us, as well—that God will be

with us no matter what. It is the promise of our faith: That nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God.

We, too, continue to live through uncertain times, surrounded by loss—of loved ones, of community, and of way of life. The pandemic continues as do other challenges such as climate change, racial injustice, and economic insecurity. And they do not have an anticipated end date. There's so much we don't know.”

This faith community is on a journey to call a settled pastor. It is a time of transition, and once again, there is so much we don't know!

But, conditions do change. Maybe not at the pace or in the direction we personally long for, but we recognize change as a fact and pattern of life. Our circumstances never remain stagnant, and we cannot make them or will them to do so.

Gilbert Rendle challenges us to consider the following: “What if the questions we now face are not the product of things gone wrong but rather of the world grown different? We need a hope that is made wise by experience and is undaunted by disappointment. We need an anxiety about the future that shows us new ways to look at things but does not unnerve us.”

Ruth is one who embodies that sort of hopeFULL forward facing to the future. Ruth is also one who reminds us that we can embody the love and presence of God for one another. In grief, there is perhaps no greater gift than the ministry of presence.

I remember back when my brother-in-law died in 1986. He was mowing the ditch at his farm when he hit a cement culvert and the tractor overturned. He tried to jump clear, but was crushed by the tractor and died. I drove in the night from Indianapolis, where

I was living at the time. When I arrived at my parent's house in the early morning my sister, Mom, and Dad were there, sitting in the darkened living room. A close friend, a neighbor from when we lived on the farm, stopped by to check on us. (You know how news spreads in small towns!) I remember her just sitting with us in that living room. Though she was normally a talkative one, she said very little...but her presence and sense of compassion was powerful.

Showing up and companioning with our kin in the experience of loss reflects the abiding love of God with us, and through us, and among us.

This story comes from Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994). It's called *Jean and Elisa, Ruth and Naomi*.

Twice a week during my year in seminary, I traveled to a senior center and housing project for low-income elderly residents...The greatest source of joy was two women who evidenced a rare kind of gracious care for each other...Jean was from Scotland and had an infectious smile, with or without her teeth. She always welcomed me with cake-like Scottish scones and butter cookies and a special blend of Scottish tea, which she kept warm in her silver teapot covered with a colorful tea cozy that bore her family's coat of arms.

Elisa was paralyzed from her neck down. She spent her day painting beautiful watercolor landscapes, using a brush held between her teeth...The two women could often be seen together taking a walk, Jean slowly but steadily pushing Elisa's wheelchair. She would pause occasionally to adjust the blanket

that swathed her friend or to tighten the scarf around Elisa's neck. With each stop, a smile passed between them. As I picture them making their way together with quiet determination, I see the strength of Ruth and Naomi. Jean and Elisa found survival in their bond of mutual devotion. And beyond survival, they offer a stellar example of life lived in joyful appreciation.

The themes of hospitality and fidelity run strong in our reading today.

Normally, we connect hospitality with being able to offer something tangible, like food or shelter. But Ruth is destitute. She has no food or shelter to offer. So she offers the only thing she has left—her own continued presence. After all, these 2 women, made so vulnerable by the loss of their husbands, have lived in the shelter of one another. In the midst of their grief and need, these two have become for one another a sort of safe space.

Fidelity is another theme in our reading. Ruth's declaration that she will accompany Naomi to Judah is so firm and matter-of-fact that we can begin to recognize that she does not see it as a choice. It is just what one does. Ruth is simply living out her fidelity to the one who has been given to her. It is the type of fidelity that is usually reserved for traditional family.

The family and the church are both places where we have the opportunity to learn to live with folks we did not choose. Martin Copenhaver says, "Our fidelity to those we are stuck with can be a reflection of the fidelity of a God who is stuck with us ALL! God does not abandon God's people when the going gets tough, even when they are as destitute as an ancient Near Eastern widow. God's fidelity is beyond a choice. Such fidelity simply is an expression of who God is. When we are faithful to

the ones we are stuck with, as members of the church are called to do—it serves as a reminder of the faithfulness of the God who is stuck with us all.

These themes of hospitality and fidelity can be traced throughout the book of Ruth. But then, later on in the final few verses, we learn that the child born to Ruth and Boaz is none other than Obed, the grandfather of the great King David. Through Ruth, a poor foreigner, God is at work in some pretty surprising and unexpected ways. But, maybe...just maybe we shouldn't consider it such a surprise! God often works through the most unlikely folks—outsiders, strangers, and the outcast. Once again, God has been able to work in amazing ways through human hospitality.