

Loss and Loyalty

By Glenn Brumbaugh

What do we do when the going gets tough?

When things just aren't working out anymore,

when everything seems to be working against us?

Who do we turn to?

Family, good friends?

Or do we just try to suck it up and deal with it on our own?

I'm sure we can all identify with the stress and frustration

of struggling to make ends meet and keep our heads above water.

We've all felt that sense of desperation and faced tough choices

at different times in our lives.

How did we handle that?

Did we suck it up and pull ourselves up by our bootstraps?

After all, isn't that the frontier spirit we elevate in our heritage,

the American way of handling things?

But the question is, is that God's way?

This morning we begin a four-part series,

taking a look at another way of handling loss

and facing our struggles

as we begin to take a closer look at the story

contained in the book of Ruth.

The first question we have to ask ourselves as we delve into this story,

is where do our loyalties lie?

With ourselves or with others?

An important concept is reflected throughout Ruth

through the use of a Hebrew word

that has no easy equivalent in English, *chesed*.

Chesed roughly translated means kindness and steadfast love for another.

But it's a little more involved than that.

Chesed presupposes an emergency situation such as danger or distress

and calls for someone to act,

someone who can intervene

to promote life in the emergency.

Chesed is only used in Hebrew

if the available helper chooses to intervene,

if not, then another word is more appropriate and correct.

As we begin our story in Ruth, this concept is prevalent all around.

These three women have suffered a crisis.

All three of their husbands have died, leaving them all widows.

Even in today's world, that can be a tough situation

but it would have been critical in their world.

In those patriarchal cultures, women depended on their male relatives

for their very survival.

One's husband literally was the primary provider of resources,

and if something happened to one's husband,

a male child would be the next in line to be the provider.

Unfortunately, neither Ruth nor Orpah had any children,

which meant they would have no way

to provide for themselves in that society.

And Naomi had lost her husband and both her sons,

putting her in the same situation.

Now Ruth and Orpah had an option.

As they were still of childbearing age,

they were still marketable as potential wives,

and could return to their homes of origin

to be matched with another husband.

Naomi, on the other hand, was just plain out of luck.

Being too old to produce an heir for a potential husband,

she had no chance of finding a husband to care for her.

Not only that, she was living in as a foreigner in another culture,

and would not be dealt kindly through whatever charitable customs

that culture would have for those without resources.

Her only viable option was to return to Judah,

and seek the charity of her own people,

things like the gleanings of the harvest

left behind for widows and orphans,

people who were excluded

from the normal system of being provided for.

Yet she simply accepts her fate and her only concern

is for the welfare of her daughters-in-law.

She wants them to have the best chance possible,

which is with their own people,

going back to their own families,

and being matched with new husbands

who can provide for them.

However, they also show great khesed for her,

not wanting to leave her to the fate she is resigned to.

Possibly out of concern, she more sharply tells them to leave,

and Orpah complies, but not Ruth.

Ruth totally commits her fate to Naomi's

and travels with her back to Bethlehem.

One could argue all three's primary loyalties are to others, not themselves.

So where is God in all of this?

One thing we will discover as we work our way through Ruth

is that God is working in the background throughout this story.

While Naomi's tale could be compared to Job

in it's tragic consequences,

God is not actively present in the telling of her story

like in Job.

There is the famine and the lifting of the famine

and the loss of the husbands,

which could be attributed to God's influence,

but God is not speaking or partaking in direct action in this book.

Instead we are left to examine how people react with each other.

Clearly the selfless acts of concern and love for each other

model one of the key concepts of Old

and particularly New Testament teachings,

of humility and concern for others before oneself.

But I think it's important to take a closer look at Naomi

and how she reacts to the events that transpire.

In her own way, she embodies that fierce individualism I mentioned

earlier,

that tough, handle it myself point of view.

However, in her situation, that's not going to get her very far.

And a spoiler alert,

as the story continues over the next several weeks,

that perspective still won't do much for her.

As we look at the characters in this story for guidance,

it's not so much the doing for others that makes the difference

as it is allowing others to do for you.

As Christians, we have focused so much

on the giving and caring to others, often at our own expense,

that we struggle to let others support us.

In a way, it's another way of expressing selfishness.

When we let our own pride keep others from helping,
we are denying them the opportunity to love and care for us.

There's actually a Hebrew word for that, mitzvah,
which is providing a blessing for another, but in a deeper sense,
it is forging a deeper connection with God as well
through blessing another.

To deny someone the opportunity to share a mitzvah
is denying them a deeper connection
through their action with the divine.

Likewise, from a Christian perspective,
we are expected to extend God's grace to others,
as we have received that grace ourselves.

When we are denied, we cannot perform that which is required of us.

In both testaments, there is an overriding theme of "us first", not "me first."

As the biblical story progresses,
we move from the "us" of Israel in the Torah,
to the "us" of everyone who lives among us, resident or not,
in the Torah and the Prophets,
to the "us" of everyone inside and out in the New Testament.

God makes clear again and again this is a group effort,
not a collection of individual struggles.

But we've kind of lost that over time, haven't we?

The early church in Acts had it right.

They shared everything

and made sure everyone had what they needed.

It was expected that you would seek

and accept the help of the group when you had struggles,

when you had need.

It was very “us” focused.

However, when we look around us today, it’s become a very “me” focused world.

Certainly, there is plenty of greed and consumerism

and that type of self-focus,

but the flip side of that is the “me” focus that I don’t need anybody’s help,

that proud “take care of myself” mindset.

It’s hard to shake, for sure.

That’s what we’re fed from day one, to do it all on our own.

But when we look at our story from Ruth today,

which character should we emulate?

The individual focus of Naomi, or the “we” focus of Ruth?

Just a little hint. We’re not reading from the book of Naomi.

So when we face the “famines” of our own times,

those challenges that can turn our society upside down

and put our own lives in crisis, where will we turn?

How will we react?

Will we struggle to do it alone, to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps,

or will we work together, accepting the helpful blessings of others?

I pray we choose the path that Ruth takes, and seek to reform the Naomi that is within each of us, seeking “us” over “me.”

May the mitzvahs abound. Amen.

Stewardship Reflection Bethany Seminary - Special giving focus for July

A Call to Serve

Think of the 23rd Psalm “Give us this day our daily bread.”

God promises to provide us with what we need to live today so we may see tomorrow.

When we think of what we actually have, though, we have more than enough. We give honor and thanks to God when we make our generous offering from our abundance of gifts, whether time, talent or treasure.

A Time for Reflection - Musical Interlude

The Prayer of Thanksgiving

Thank you, God, for the ministries of the people of your church. Thank you, God, for the bounty of your blessings you have poured out upon us.

We show our gratitude in sharing our abundance and blessings with others through our time, talents, and resources.

Consecrate our gifts back to you and may they be multiplied in ways we cannot imagine. Amen.

Hymn – Bless'd be the Tie that Binds - 421

BENEDICTION

May God bless you and keep you through the khesed of others,

May you receive the mitzvahs with joy,

And give blessings and grace as you yourself have been blessed. Amen.