

“Sacred Companions”

Ruth 1:1-18

All Saint’s Sunday, November 5, 2006

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The book of Ruth begins in tragedy. Naomi and her family escape to Moab because there is a great famine in Judah. First Naomi’s husband Elimelech dies. Naomi’s sons marry Moabite women and enjoy ten happy years together when the two of them suddenly die as well, leaving three women with three dead husbands and no means of support. Given these horrific circumstances these women now have some very difficult decisions to make. None of their choices seem very promising. Naomi believes her only choice is to return to her own country and live her life out among her people. She does not, however, intend for her daughter-in-laws to follow her. In fact, she insists that they do not. Initially both Ruth and Orpah refuse to leave Naomi. When Naomi insists a second time only Orpah accepts Naomi’s offer. She does so with a heavy heart, fearing the future that awaits Naomi. Ruth however, does not leave Naomi.

This story is a beautiful testament to friendship and fidelity. It speaks eloquently of the ties that bind us to others, some of our own choosing and some that have been chosen for us. Ruth is bound to Naomi by marriage. She enters her family as a beloved wife and soon becomes a devoted friend and daughter in law. Now they are both widows facing an uncertain future. Ruth married a foreigner. Her husband, like her mother in law, was from Bethlehem in Judah. Now with nothing to keep Naomi in Moab, she decides to go home.

Ruth and Naomi witness to the kind of love two women can grow to have for each other. Through them we are reminded again that loss teaches us many lessons; ones we would likely choose to learn in some other, less painful way. In this moment of transition, Ruth and Naomi have no money, social connections, or education on which to rely. They are merely wives and mothers doing what the culture taught them to do. They were faithful and loving, giving and generous and now their lives have been forever changed. At this moment they have each other and the gifts God has given them to survive.

The theologian and teacher Joan Chittister believes the story of Ruth and Naomi is much more than a witness to the love and faithfulness two people

share. It is more than Ruth's courageous proclamation that is so often read at wedding ceremonies. Through Ruth and Naomi we learn how to face loss and change with dignity and grace. When we experience loss, we might remember how they were able to both recognize and call upon the resources God had already given them. They remind me that God will always be our sacred companion even when all others are gone.

Like so many people who go through life altering change, Ruth and Naomi wonder "who am I when I am no longer who and what I was?" There is no miracle in sight to save these women, no angels lurking in the corners of their lives waiting to deliver them. Everything they had, everything they ever thought they wanted is gone. Once Orpah leaves, Ruth and Naomi have only each other and their faith in Naomi's God.

Loss of any kind—rejection, abandonment, divorce, or death—is a shocking, numbing, gray thing that at the outset, at least, freezes the heart and slows the mind, says Chittister. Loss changes life at the root. Irrevocably. What was once at the center of life—the person, the position, the plan, the title, the lifestyle—is no more. Life is never the same again. What we have known, perhaps for years, to be good or comfortable or familiar is now gone. What we took for granted shifts and tilts and weakens. She says, "Emptiness becomes our new companion, God more a rumor than a fact. Even our spiritual certainties can fade a little: Where is God when we are left in a sea of disorientation? Where is the will of God for us in loss?" For those of you who have experienced such a loss, these questions may be hauntingly familiar.

Loss, once reckoned, once absorbed, she says, is a precious gift. Given this loss, you can no longer be what you once were, however, you are now free to be something new. Would you prefer to go back to the way things were? Would you not beg God to turn back the hands of time, to undo what has been done, to give you a second chance? Perhaps. Now you must ask different questions. Rather than "why is this happening to me," your questions may become "where can I go to find new life? In the midst of this dark night, how might I experience resurrection? "

We learn certain spiritual lessons from loss that we can learn in no other way. When we honor the process of grief we can then absorb its precious lessons. Grief teaches us that when we think we have nothing, we still have

inside of us that which can never be taken away. What always remains are those gifts that come for God, ready to be used in a new way.

“Sometimes loss requires the concentration of spirit that brings us to our best. Often it is only loss that reduces us to our most meaningful resource, ourselves. Left without the security of the past, we are forced to stand alone, to 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,” says Chittester.

I am so very thankful for Ruth and Naomi’s story. Even if never suffer the breadth and depth of tragedy they do, their witness teaches us so many important things. When tragedy struck they had two choices, succumb to the pain and face their own demise or move boldly and perhaps a bit blindly into a new future. We see as did Ruth and Naomi, that life is not one path; but many paths, most of them unexplored in favor of closer, clearer ones. Will we linger in grief or seek a sacred companion to accompany us on that less traveled and less familiar path?

When we have done our grieving well, accepting the care and companionship of trusted friends and family, we will eventually be able to move on. The decision to move forward is a personal one, it takes each person more or less time to take that first step. Before we can move we must be willing to reassess the past. What has that part of my life taught me? It is our willingness to look critically and lovingly at ourselves that frees us to journey gracefully into the future. Only then will we be able to see ourselves as separate from what we’ve lost. We are more than a woman whose husband has died or whose marriage has ended or has beaten cancer. If we do not release ourselves from our past, God is unable to do God’s recreating work in us.

Grief is an inevitable part of life. When we have loved someone or something so deeply, we naturally grieve its loss. What we do not grieve was not worth having to begin with. Good grief, grief that does not debilitate us, becomes a launching pad for the future. This journey through grief can be much easier when we accept the gift of sacred companions who love us through our toughest moments and rejoice with us at the journey’s end. That is Ruth’s greatest gift to Naomi, her willingness to be Naomi’s sacred companion. Ruth’s faithfulness would not be forgotten.

Naomi did the only thing she knew to do. She picked up and went back home, to Bethlehem, not necessarily to find refuge in the family she might find there, but to be what God now intended her to be. No longer the wife of Elimelech, the mother of Mahlon or Chilion, she was now free to become whatever God now had in store for her. Ruth went with her because it was the right thing to do. She faced an uncertain future, unsure what God intended for her. What was certain was Naomi's love and the faithfulness. Love had brought them together and now this great love would be their companion into the future.

We are so very blessed when we can name those special people who have been like Ruth, faithful to the end. Our own journey from death to new life begins by trusting that God is always with us, loving us, leading us, longing us into that which we are intended to be. Then, with Naomi, we take can a new road, not because we know what will happen at the end of it, but because we cannot be whole without walking it. It is a sacred journey, from death back to life. Like Ruth and Naomi, we are blessed to share that journey with sacred companions, those faithful and loving people that never forsaken or abandon us. We have honored and named some of those sacred companions this day, those saints whom we have adored, and whom we trust accompany us into our future. May God continue to bless them and us as we seek to be good and faithful companions one to each other. May it be so!
Amen

Source:

Joan Chittister, "The Story of Ruth: Moments of Loss and Faith," sermon on Ruth 1: 1-18, aired January 14, 2001.