

Supporting Each Other

Scripture: Ruth 1; John 15:12-17

Faith Link: We grow in faith together.¹

Introduction

Ruth is one of three biblical books that consist of a single short story. The other two are Jonah and Esther. Stories are important. They report events and entertain readers. They also define and renew community and personal identity. We're connected to the past and guided in the present by the stories we remember and retell.

Our individual lives and the lives of our communities of faith have meaning, purpose, and direction as they are incorporated into the Great Story of Faith. We recognize the power of narrative as we read and experience the biblical stories, as we absorb and share them with each other and with people who have never heard them before.

The book of Ruth provides models for responsible community life. It tells about women making their way in a man's world. It tells of someone who maintains her faith in the midst of misfortune. Above all, Ruth is a story of steadfast love and support.

It's not unusual for a really good story to be adapted into another form – a song, a play, a television show, or a movie. You may recall that when I preached a series of sermons on the book of Ruth five years ago, we imagined how the book of Ruth might be adapted into a TV show called – not very imaginatively – *The Book of Ruth*. We're used to reruns. Let's revisit the first four episodes of *The Book of Ruth*. I'll spare you from hearing the theme song I wrote back then.

The Book of Ruth: Episode One

The first person we meet in episode one is Elimelech, the head of the household. The name of everyone in this story has a special meaning. Elimelech's name means "My God Is King." His tells us that God is the ruler of this household. This is a spiritual family as well as a biological one.

Elimelech, his wife, and two sons are taking the road east out of their home village of Bethlehem. Bethlehem, which ironically means "House of Bread," is in the grip of a famine, so they're walking over fifty miles to the country of Moab, where food is plentiful. Moab isn't a friendly place for them either politically or religiously.

The hostility between Israel and Moab appears frequently throughout Israel's history. According to Genesis 19, Moab was the son born from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter. Numbers 21-25 records several conflicts between Moab and Israel, including intermarriage, which is condemned as seducing Israel to worship foreign gods. But living in Moab is a better alternative than starving in Judah, so they settle there.

Then Elimelech dies. This is sad, but at least the sons are full grown and can take care of their mother. The future looks even brighter when both boys marry. But the names of the two sons warn us that trouble is ahead. Mahlon means "Sickness;" Chilion means "Spent." Sure enough, ten years and no children later, the two men die. The household is reduced to three widows.

¹ The sermon is drawn from Week 10 of "Seeking God Together" from *Current*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Current - Menno Media](#); Eugene F. Roop, *Ruth, Jonah, Esther, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, ©2002, Herald Press, Scottsdale, PA, pp. 13-42; and Suzanne Lawrence, *Called into God's Family: The Book of Ruth*, ©1995 Women in Mission of the General Conference Mennonite Church and Women's Missionary and Service Commission of the Mennonite Church, pp. 11-12.

Naomi knows that her daughters-in-law will desire to remarry, leaving her totally alone. If they go back to Bethlehem, however, one of her husband's relatives may provide for her. Then she hears that the famine is over, and the three women set off to find new life in Bethlehem, the "House of Bread."

It's been a long time since Naomi traveled on that road. Walking it again brings back memories of her hometown. She sees her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, as the people of Bethlehem will see them...as Moabites, mistrusted, foreign, pagan, enemies. She realizes they will never find good husbands there.

Because she loves them, Naomi decides to send Orpah and Ruth back to their own people. Surely their families will take them back into their households and help them find good husbands. She stops in the road and begins to share her thoughts. They're shocked. If they leave now, they will never see her again. The young women begin to cry uncontrollably.

Naomi remains determined to go on alone, even though she knows that means growing old and dying without a family. As a parting benediction, Naomi asks that God be as steadfastly loyal to the two young widows as they have been to her and to the dead family members. Naomi prays that God will provide Orpah and Ruth all that she herself has lost.

As episode one concludes, we find connections to our stories:

- We know that trouble can strike without warning or explanation in any time or place.
- Illness, death, financial difficulty, violence, or natural disaster can render anyone suddenly homeless.
- To live as an outsider, immigrant or refugee brings on additional danger – threats of discrimination, harsh treatment, and deportation.
- God's presence and the presence of loyal family members and friends helps us bear the pain.

The Book of Ruth: Episode Two

Episode two of *The Book of Ruth* opens with the three tearful widows stalled on the road between Moab and Judah. They must make decisions that will affect the rest of their lives. Naomi has ordered Orpah and Ruth to return to their homeland for their best chance for happiness.

In those days, a woman in the household of a kind and prosperous husband can be assured of food and clothes. If she has children, she is assured of care in her old age. As well as providing for her physical needs, her family gives her status in the community. If her husband and sons receive honor, honor comes to her. Marriage, ideally, brings her peace. Singleness, on the other hand, is a struggle. It means living off the leftovers of other people's lives. A single woman has rights, but she often has to take the initiative to ask, maybe even beg, for them.

Although Naomi accepts her destiny as a widow, she hates to see these young women thrown into such a life. Orpah reluctantly agrees with what her mother-in-law is saying. Although she will miss Naomi, she says a final good-bye and begins her journey back to Moab.

There are several possible meanings for the name Orpah. Some scholars say it means "Stiff-necked" or "Stubborn." But she isn't being stubborn. She's doing exactly as Naomi orders. Other scholars say the name means "Back of the Neck" or "She Who Turns Away." Although this could seem derogatory, the name literally describes what Orpah does. She turns away from her traveling companions and shows them the back of her neck. She chooses to attend to the needs of her family of origin rather than her family by marriage. She agrees with Naomi that returning to her home country is the best choice.

Naomi is right about security, honor, and peace coming from membership in a household. It's likely Orpah ended up having a good life, but in this story, we never hear from her again.

We connect with episode two:

- We know that our relationship status affects our lives.
- Marriage and singleness each bring challenges and advantages.
- Families can be formed by birth and by choice.
- We all belong to a variety of groups that could be called family. Saying yes to one of these families may mean saying no to another one.
- Even good choices bring pain.

The Book of Ruth: Episode Three

As episode three opens, there are only two women on the road. Now Naomi turns to Ruth and says, “Your sister-in-law has gone back to her people. Go home too. Follow Orpah.”

But Ruth replies, “Stop pushing me away, insisting that I stop following you! Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will also die and be buried there near you. May the Eternal One punish me—and even more so—if anything besides death comes between us.”²

Naomi can’t make sense of these words. “What does she mean,” Naomi says to herself, “die where I die? Will she stay in Bethlehem for my sake? She has no legal obligation. When she’s finished taking care of me, she’ll be too old to marry. Who will take care of her? Neither common sense nor religion requires her to do this. Where did she get these ideas? She’s decided not to listen to me. She is staying with me!”

While Naomi is confused, Ruth’s vision is clear. She is living up to her name which has been interpreted as deriving from a word meaning “Friend” or “Companion.” At the core of her speech is a three-part explanation of the life she is vowing to lead. First, she is promising to stay with Naomi in a literal, physical sense. She will live in her house. If she remarries, Naomi will be invited to live with her. When Naomi dies, Ruth will not leave town but stay and tend the grave. When she herself dies, she will be buried next to Naomi.

Second, Ruth is promising to claim Naomi’s friends and relatives as her own. Elimelech and Naomi are identified as Ephrathites from Bethlehem. Now Ruth wants to be known as an Ephrathite.

Finally, Ruth’s promise to Naomi means claiming Naomi’s God. She will never again worship the Moabite god, Chemosh. She has seen a reflection of Yahweh, the God of Israel, in the character of Elimelech’s household. She trusts Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Naomi and Ruth pick up their bundles and bags and journey toward Bethlehem together. They walk in silence. Ruth’s speech, combining images of life and death in a new pattern of life in the midst of death, has left Naomi speechless.

Episode three leaves us with questions of identity:

- Who are my people?
- What would it mean for me to leave my people?
- How would I make your people be my people?
- How do I respond to someone who, for reasons beyond their control, must leave their people and become my neighbor?
- Relationship is key. To understand or to become part of a new group, I need to have a relationship with someone in that group.

The Book of Ruth: Episode Four

As episode four begins, Naomi and Ruth are arriving at the gate of Bethlehem. Naomi has been bolstering her courage, so that when she steps through the gate, she will be able to say, “I’m okay, I’m tough. That’s the way life goes. Things didn’t work out the way I’d planned, but I’ll go on. I’ll get my life back together.”

But the moment she steps back into Bethlehem, a flood of memories hit her and knock the resolve right out of her. Suddenly she is face to face with the contrast between her old life and the life she has now. Her emotions spiral downward into despair. Her despair quickly turns to bitterness, which vents its anger on God.

Life was full and sweet in the early days, but everything is different now. She is finally able to come back home, but she has come back empty. All she has left is a Moabite daughter-in-law. What good is that? Without husbands or sons, both she and Ruth are doomed to a future of poverty and loneliness.

Naomi is bitter. She doesn’t deserve this from God. She isn’t going to pretend that she understands or is happy about her circumstances, about what God has done.

² Ruth 1:16-17, *The Voice*.

The women of the village begin to gather around her. “Aren’t you Naomi, who used to be our neighbor and friend? You look different. What has happened to you? Where is your husband? Where are your sons?”

Naomi unburdens her soul. “Don’t call me Naomi, for that name speaks of pleasantness and sweetness. You’re right. I am different. Now that all my family is dead, call me Mara, for that name speaks of the bitterness that fills me. God has made my life bitter.”

In the blindness of her grief, Naomi feels that she is truly alone. She isn’t aware of the support surrounding her – above her, a mysterious, yet faithful God; beside her, women of the village absorbing her pain; and behind her, Ruth, who will become more to her than a companion and friend.

We feel the emotions and ask the questions of episode four.

- Life isn’t fair.
- The pain of suffering, whether explained or unexplained, can’t be relieved by simplistic theological explanations.
- Naomi’s complaint and the laments found in over one-third of the psalms demonstrate that God is big enough to handle our anger.
- Even when we are unaware of it, God is with us, and we have companions who will support us in our journey of despair and pain.

During August, our focus is on experiencing God beside us. We experience God in the people who surround us. This is demonstrated in the story we just heard.

The actions of the characters in *The Book of Ruth* run counter to the long-standing tension between Moab and Israel – between their home countries, their ethnicities, and their religions. They don’t allow their prejudices to dictate their actions. Naomi treats Ruth and Orpah as daughters in their homeland. Ruth’s actions illustrate this same steadfast love for Naomi as she pledges loyalty to Naomi’s people and God.

In the chapters that follow today’s text, Boaz gives food and protection to Ruth as she gleans in his fields. His willingness to fulfill the role of kinsman redeemer to Naomi and Ruth demonstrates his loyalty to family and compassion for widows and foreigners. During a time when people of other cultures and nationalities were excluded from worship and community life, the story of Ruth provides a different perspective.

By the end of the book, the story has come full circle. Ruth finds food and a husband as she gleans in the fields. Her loyalty and love for her mother-in-law Naomi are rewarded with a home and a son. Famine is replaced by plenty, displacement by a new home, and death by a new birth. And the God of Israel welcomes Gentiles, even Moabites, into God’s family.

In John 15, Jesus taught that when we love each other, we produce fruit that lasts. Our love for other people increases our desire to support and serve others. In our world today, people notice when we care about others. Consider your life as an individual and our life as a congregation.

- Who are you supporting?
- Who is supporting you?
- Who are we supporting?
- How are we growing in faith together?
- How do we reveal God’s love for people through our words and actions?

Let us continue to use our hands and feet, our time and our talent, our money and other resources to support and help others. Thanks be to God for the gift of this life, and for those who walk with us. Amen.