May 14, 2023

THE BENCH SITTER’S LAMENT

Ruth 1:8-21

INTRODUCTION

It’s Mothers Day. I thought it appropriate to start off today with a few quotes and comments about what it’s like to be a mother. Superstar singer, Carrie Underwood said, “The majority of my diet is made up of food my kids didn’t finish.” Actress Jennifer Garner said, “Once you have kids you never go to the bathroom by yourself again. At least one of them is in there with you at all times.”

One Mom said, “You know you’re a mom when picking up another human to smell their rear end is not only normal, it’s necessary.” Another said, “If you’re a Mom, you understand why Mama Bear’s porridge was too cold.” Yet another said, “Silence is golden, unless you have little kids. Then it’s suspicious.” A Mom was about to do the dishes on Mother’s Day. Her dutiful and loving son said, “Relax, Mom. You can do them tomorrow.” Moms are amazing. Nothing is really lost until Mom can’t find it. Moms often say things like, “Get down from that tree. I’m warning you, if you fall out of that tree and break both of your legs, don’t come running to me.”

I see my daughter and my daughter-in-law mothering 6 young children ranging in age from 1 to 7 years old,, and I see that they are incredibly stressed and tired all the time. It does get easier when the kids get a little older. But it’s never easy. On our neighborhood on line chat one mom recently asked how to deal with the fact that her teenager never listened to her. We sent her a story of a study that has recently been done at the Stanford School of Medicine. The study used MRI brain scans of teenagers and it revealed that when teenagers don’t seem to hear their parents, there is a reason. It is that their brains literally are not registering their parents’ voices! The researchers theorized this is part of the process of children beginning to be prepared to live an independent life.

In honor of Mother’s Day, I want us to look at the story of a mother who suffered through terrible loss. She hurt horribly, but there are some things all of us can learn about thriving in life, especially when times are tough. Let’s look at the familiar story of a mom named Naomi that is found in Ruth 1:8-21.

NAOMI SUFFERED GREAT GRIEF

The events in Ruth occurred when judges ruled in Israel. This was a period when Israel went through multiple cycles of disobedience to God, consequent judgment in the form of invasion by neighboring enemies, and rescue by a series of leaders of dynamic leaders like Gideon and others. Israel was consistent in its unfaithfulness to God during that period. At one point during that period a woman named Naomi moved with her husband Elimelech from Judah to the neighboring country of Moab.

Laurie and I have lived in this area for almost 44 years. During those many years we have lived through several recessions. We were in one when we moved here. Just about 10 years later another one hit. This one had a significant impact on us as many of our best friends had to move out of state. I calculated that in one year 20% of our congregation moved away. When a recession hits it seems like many people move away. That’s exactly what happened in the book of Ruth. Only back then 3400 years ago it wasn’t called a recession. It was called a famine. It wasn’t merely a case of it being hard to find a job. It was an agrarian society. If they had a prolonged drought such as we had been going through prior to this past winter, crops failed and people didn’t have enough to eat. They could starve to death. A famine tended to have an effect similar to the recessions we have experienced. People moved away in hopes of finding better conditions. The key player in the story we are looking at today was a woman named Naomi. She and her husband Elimelech, and their two sons were Israelis living in Bethlehem. They moved to Moab, a country to the east of Israel, in hopes of finding more plentiful food.

It might seem curious that they moved to Moab for a couple of reasons. One was that Moab was an on again, off again enemy of Israel. They were one of the nations that periodically invaded Israel. The events of Ruth took place during a time of peace between the two countries. The other reason it seems unusual that the family went to Moab was that famines usually were the result of droughts. Moab was drier than Israel, which would make us think that if there was a famine in Israel, there would have been one in Moab too. However, I suspect this famine was not the result of drought, but of invasion. When armies invaded they stole crops and food supplies, and what they didn’t take they would destroy. Repeated invasions had left Israel’s economy and infrastructure in ruins. Moab hadn’t been invaded as much as Israel so things were better there.

This was a big move. It meant leaving their home and their culture and going to live in a very foreign culture. It would not have been easy. They would have been outsiders. But it was what they had to do to survive. Unfortunately, they weren’t there very long before Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a widow with two sons. The two boys married local girls, one named Orpah, not Oprah, and the other named Ruth. Sadly, after the family had been in Moab about 10 years, both sons also died. Can you imagine the crushing grief that poor Naomi experienced? First, her husband died, then both of her sons. Her family was totally wiped out. She was all alone in a foreign land.

Not only did she have to deal with grief, but she was in an impossible financial situation. In those ancient cultures women had no power. They were not allowed to own land, and in an agrarian society, that was the source of wealth. When Naomi’s sons died because she was left with no means of support. She couldn’t own land. She couldn’t run a business. She had no job. She would be totally dependent on the charity of other people. Since she was an outsider she was unlikely to receive much help from the locals.

Verse 6 says, “When Naomi heard in Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters in law prepared to return home from there.” Conditions had improved in Israel. Naomi could go back home where she had extended family and a community that knew her and where there were provisions for widows to at least have enough to subsist on.

For the moment, I want to focus on what Naomi said when she got back to Bethlehem. When she returned after being gone for years, it was big news that Naomi had returned. Hey, Naomi’s back! But look at what she said in verse 20. “Don’t call me Naomi. Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune on me.”

The name Naomi meant “pleasant.” She said people shouldn’t call her Naomi anymore because her life was the farthest thing from pleasant. She said they should call her Mara, which meant bitter, for that was what life had become for her. She said God had afflicted her, and I think we’d all have to say she had every right to feel that way. Naomi sounded like a sad, bitter woman. It sounds like she has lost her faith and is angry at God. Earlier she said God made her life very bitter. That would hardly be surprising, given what she’d been through. But that wasn’t the whole story.

NAOMI CONTINUED TO WORSHIP GOD

How do you get that, Rick? There are a couple of indications of this in the story. It is possible to grieve, to mourn over great loss and to question why God would allow such pai, but still believe in him. One thing we need to remember is that people of faith who have experienced great pain are not called on by God to pretend they don’t hurt and that they feel just fine. God does not ask us to be impervious to pain, loss, disappointment, or sorrow.

In Job 31:5-6 Job said, “If I have walked in falsehood or my foot has hurried after deceit, let God weigh me in honest scales and he will know that I am blameless.” He was protesting that the horrors that had fallen upon him were not fair. So in verse 35 he said, “Oh that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense. Let the Almighty answer me.” He’s honestly pouring out his hurt to God. In Psalm 6:2-3 David wrote, “Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint; heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in deep anguish. How long, Lord, how long?” There are a number of Psalms that express pain like that, and they are all intended as worship.

Yes, Naomi was in pain, and she didn’t try to hide it. She poured out her sorrow to God as well as to other people. But notice how she describes God. He is the Almighty. She still believes he is the all powerful creator and ruler of all. She acknowledges that God ruled even over the awful events of her life. She still believes God is there. She does not have a clue why he would have such tragedy blow up her life, but notice that she says it is the Almighty who has afflicted her. She is certain he is still the sovereign God who ruled even over her tragedies.

Author and pastor Tony Evans wrote, “Our God is sovereign…There are no accidents with God.” Pastor Mark Altrogge says, “God has total control of all things, past present and future. Nothing happens that is out of his knowledge and control.” Naomi believed that.

In chapter 2 a good man, the wealthy Boaz is taken with Naomi’s daughter in law, Ruth. He comes to her aid and when Ruth tells Naomi about him Naomi’s response in verse 20 is, “The Lord bless him.” She still believes in the Lord and is asking God to be good to Boaz. She is still believing in him and trusting him.

There is another fact that is easy to miss in this story, but is a telling point about Naomi’s faith. Naomi was not consumed with her own sorrow to the point where it blotted out everything else. Ruth, of course, becomes the focal point in this story. Her choice in chapter 1 is one of the most touching points of the story.

When Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem, her two daughters in law, Orpah and Ruth, determine they will go with her. Think about that for a moment. Think of all the jokes about mother in law. “I just got back from a pleasure trip. I took my mother in law to the airport.” A couple went on a safari and took his mother with them. One night they woke up and discovered his mother was missing. Not far from the camp they came on a chilling site. The mother was backed up against a tree, facing a ferocious looking, snarling lion. The man said, “Oh, no, what should I do?” His wife said, “Nothing. The lion got himself into this mess. He can get himself out.”

The mother in law is a cliché everywhere in our society. Laurie has said she never thought of herself becoming a mother in law. But now she finds she is one. It is a role she has had to learn to play with a light touch. She wants to be a blessing to all of those in the next generation of our family, our kids and their spouses. But it is not always easy, and that’s why there are so many jokes about mothers in law.

Naomi showed her true character when she decided to go back to Bethlehem and her daughters in law expressed their desire to go with her. The very fact that both women wanted to go with her speaks volumes about her. They were willing to leave their own families, to leave their homes, the culture they had grown up in, in order to go to a very foreign place where they knew no one, so they could be with their mother in law. Their mother in law! They preferred being with Naomi to their own families. They would choose being with her even if it meant having to live in a foreign land with a foreign culture.

Culture is a big deal. It certainly would have been back in that day. The Jewish people have always had a unique culture that sets them apart from others. A number of years ago I was asked to take part in the wedding for a young man who had grown up in our church. The wedding was going to be in Colorado. The young woman this man was marrying was a bright, very devout Messianic Jew. She and her family lived by ancient Jewish traditions, but they were vibrant believers in Jesus the Messiah. There were some aspects of that wedding that were, in my experience, unique. As in, they were the only times in my many years of ministry and performing wedding ceremonies that I have encountered them. The first unique thing was that they asked 4 men to conduct the ceremony, me being one. I’ve done weddings with one other officiant before, but never 3. It was who the other 3 were that was even more unique. They were 2 rabbis and a cantor. It sounds like a joke, doesn’t it? A cantor, 2 rabbis and a pastor walk into a wedding. All 3 of those men were very Jewish, and very much followers of Jesus. They were wonderful brothers in Christ. But it was very obvious that their culture was not my culture. The wedding included a number of the classic Jewish traditions, smashing the glass, signing a ketubah, the bride circling the groom 7 times. One of the most unique was the cantor singing Scripture in Hebrew. Of course, at the reception they danced the Hora and sang *Hava Negila* for so long I thought they were never going to stop. There was a clear culture clash moment when the mother of the bride confronted me because I didn’t wear a yarmulke. I pointed out to her that wasn’t a biblical custom and in fact there was a passage in 1 Corinthians 11:7 says that a man ought to pray with his head uncovered. And, oh by the way, Jesus didn’t wear one. She admitted I was right and let it go with a good attitude. My point here is that there was a lot foreign about that for me, and that was just one wedding. To move to Israel those girls were going to have to adapt to a place and a culture where they spoke a different language, they had a different faith, had a very different world view, different values, different traditions and an extremely different moral code. This was going to be a massive change for them. Yet they were willing to make that change to be with Naomi.

The kind of character Naomi had is revealed by her response to the daughters in law. They were still young enough that they could get married again. Their chances of finding another husband in Israel were low. They had a better chance of marrying again in Moab than they would as pagan foreigners in Israel. Life for Naomi would have been easier and certainly much less lonely if the two girls went with her. But she was more concerned for them than she was for herself. She insisted that they stay in Moab. In verse 9 she said to them, “May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Naomi was sacrificing what would be good for her in order to make life better for the two girls. She loved them enough to sacrifice for their good.

She convinced Orpah to stay in Moab. Weeping, Orpah gave in to Naomi’s wishes. But Ruth would have none of it. She refused to leave Naomi’s side. In verses 16-17 she spoke what are now immortal words. “Where you go, I will go and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” What beautiful devotion and commitment. Rarely have there been more touching and powerful words of love and sacrifice. But I think we should especially take note of the words, “Your God will be my God.” What does that tell you about Naomi’s faith? If Naomi was feeling like God was cruel and uncaring, if he had given her a raw deal, and if she was wallowing in bitterness and anger toward God, do you think Ruth would be saying “your God will be my God”? Yes, Naomi was very real about her sorrow and grief. But the only explanation for why Ruth would give up her previous practice of worshiping the gods of her people and claim Naomi’s God as the one true God, is that she had seen rock solid, life giving faith in that God in Naomi.

The religious environment of Moab was polytheistic and more than a little superstitious. Among other things they worshiped the sun, the stars and nature. Their chief god was Chemosh, whose name meant destroyer or subduer. He was a pretty angry supposed god who seemed to have a lust for human blood. Part of the worship of Chemosh involved human sacrifice, especially the sacrifice of children. The Chemosh religion was filled with degrading practices, brutality, fear and superstition. Ruth had learned from Naomi about the One true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. She had learned that he is very real, he rules over all, but he is a God of goodness, compassion, love, justice and kindness. He stands against the injustice, inhumanity and violence so prevalent in the human race. In him she had found a God she could trust and worship, a God she could love and serve. She had learned of this God by watching and listening to Naomi. Later in the book, in 2:12, Boaz would say to Ruth that she had come to take refuge under the wings of Israel’s God. Naomi was a big part of the reason for that.

In verses 8-9 Naomi had told her two daughters in law, “May the Lord show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” She still believed in the kindness and goodness of God. She still trusted him to work in their lives. Can you imagine what a powerful statement of faith that made to those two girls. In the face of so much grief and sorrow, so much loss, Naomi was saying to them, “God is still here. He is Almighty. He is good and kind. I still trust him to bring good in your lives.”

GOD HAD A SOVEREIGN PLAN FOR NAOMI

What happened when Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem is the stuff of Hollywood romance movies. One of the provisions for the poor in Israel was they could glean in fields of wealthy people. While Ruth was doing that to provide at least some food for Naomi and her, she caught the eye of Boaz, the wealthy owner of those fields. Word had gotten around about Ruth’s devotion to her mother in law, so he knew she was a woman of great heart and character. It is obvious that he also thought she was not hard to look at.

I don’t know why Hallmark hasn’t picked up on this story and turned it into one of their movies. The story has all the hallmarks of a formulaic Hallmark movie. There’s a lot of emotion, there’s a perfect meet cute scene when Boaz encounters Ruth for the first time. It is obvious that sparks fly between them from that first encounter. There is an obstacle that crops up, one that could keep them apart, in the form of a potential rival who could claim Ruth. The obstacle is overcome, and finally Boaz and Ruth get married. That marriage solves the financial issues of Ruth and Naomi.

But that’s not all it did. In chapter 4 Ruth gave birth to a son. The people rejoiced that something wonderful had happened to poor Naomi. They praised God and said to her in 4:15 that her daughter in law was better to her than 7 sons. They rejoiced and said in 4:17, “Naomi has a son!” They named the boy Obed, and, we are told, “He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

Naomi was faithful to God despite her terrible trials, and because of her Ruth found faith in the true God. She came to Israel where she married. She ended up being the great grandmother of David, Israel’s greatest king, the writer of much of the Psalms. But even that wasn’t all. There is a genealogy in Matthew 1. In verses 5-6 it lists as part of the genealogy, “Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab, Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.” What makes this enormously important is this is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah.

Naomi undoubtedly had tremendous joy in the birth of Obed. She technically was not Obed’s grandmother, but the truth is she was the only maternal grandmother that boy would ever know. So you can be sure she rejoiced in that child as much as any grandparent has ever rejoiced in a grandchild. However, she never knew the impact that child’s descendants would have on the world. She never knew that Obed’s grandson would be Israel’s greatest king. She never knew that he would write a song that began, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Even more significant, she never knew that one of the descendants of that boy would be the Savior of the world. She had no idea that all of history would be divided on that Savior’s life and literally billions of lives would be forever changed, given new life and hope, through her descendant.

All human beings want to make at least some kind of difference in the world. We want to think that we somehow mattered. In our very confused culture the emphasis is on men and women having a successful career, because our culture measures the value of people by money. If you don’t have a job making good money, the conclusion is that you have very little value. But somewhere down deep, we all know that’s the wrong metric. We should know that what matters is the effect we have on other people. It is about loving them and being loved by them and about making a difference in their lives. In God’s sovereign wisdom and plan, Naomi ended up having an impact on the lives of people that is immense, almost immeasurable. Her faith and her actions continue to impact us today, more than 3 millennia after her life.

APPLICATION

SEEK TO BE A PERSON WITH IMPACT

Focus on making a difference with people. We read about Naomi thousands of years after she lived because she made a difference. In the middle of her woes, truly grievous losses, she continued to love her daughters in law and to be an example of faith for them. In so doing she literally changed the course of history.

We were all made in God’s image. One aspect of that is that we were created to be people of significance. Psychologists tell us that one of our most powerful motivations is to have significance. You may have observed those of us who play the various guitars on Sunday morning have them plugged into little boxes on the floor. There are various kinds of boxes, but all of us have one that is a tuner. It is frustrating to play an out of tune guitar. It’s not very pleasant for those who listen either. The good news is there is a way to avoid that. The guitar sends a signal to the tuner that enables you to tune each string. But there is a catch. Coming out of the tuner box is a cable that carries the signal from the guitar to the sound mixer. There is a button on the top of the tuner you step on to tune the guitar, and while you’re doing that the signal doesn’t go to the sound system. When you’ve tuned the guitar you step on the button and that allows the signal to go through to the system. Several months ago I forgot to hit that button when I was done tuning, so no sound from my guitar went to the sound system. On the video I’m playing away, but it looked like I was playing air guitar, for there was no sound coming through. I felt like a real dummy. I’m not playing the guitar for my own amusement. I want to add to the band’s sound and make a difference. If I don’t do that the obvious question is, why bother? I play to make a difference.

That’s a part of being human. My sports experience provided me with the awareness of the need to make a difference. My high school years I was a scrub on the baseball team. I was only the starter for a brief time at the end of my junior year. What you experience as a scrub is in practice you get fewer swings in the batting cage. You get few reps in the field practicing plays, if any. You stand out in the outfield and catch fly balls a lot during batting practice. The coach pretty much looks past you. You get a constant message that you don’t matter. I can remember at times thinking that if I wasn’t on the team it wouldn’t make any difference at all. If I just quit the team wouldn’t even miss a beat and the coach wouldn’t care at all. I can tell you that it doesn’t feel good. That’s the bench sitter’s lament. Why even bother?

If we don’t make a difference in life, that will be our lament. We have a built in desire to have some kind of impact. But what we often fail to grasp is that making an impact is about affecting people. In the end, everything else will be hollow because it doesn’t matter.

We impact people by loving them. Loving them the way Naomi loved her daughters in law. And we can impact them by having an inspiring faith the way Naomi did. We don’t have to do big, dramatic miraculous things. What could Naomi have done in her life that would have the kind of impact she had through her grandson and his descendants? Literally nothing, because no one ever has or ever will have the impact that Jesus Christ has had. Naomi had significance by loving her daughters in law and affecting their lives.

It astounds me that people don’t see the obvious. They want to feel like they are significant. You get a sense of that significance by affecting other people. Parents will never affect anyone as much as they will their own children. I was thinking recently about how caring for our kids ripples through the world. Laurie and I got married in 1979. For 3 years it was just the two of us. Then Carissa came on the scene. Then Joel and Toby followed. What struck me was now I look at our family and instead of 2 of us, there are 12! That’s just the ones we are related to. How many people have we affected through the influence of our children? How many will we influence through the lives of our 6 grandchildren. The affects are going to go on for generations. Should we not make that the priority?

Loving people is how you most impact them. That is true of your spouse if you have one, your children, your neighbors, your friends. All around us are people desperate to be loved, and we have the ability to impact them enormously just by loving them, just as Naomi did with Ruth.

TRUST THAT GOD IS AT WORK

It had to have been hard to believe for Naomi, but she continued to believe in her God. Though she poured out her sadness and grief over the way her life had gone, she also believed God is almighty and sovereign. It is clear that her faith inspired Ruth.

One of the most powerful ways we can impact people is to trust that even in the hard times God is at work. Trust that he is a good and sovereign God. Believe that as he said in Romans 8:28, he is working good for us even out of the difficult things. That doesn’t mean we preach it to others who are hurting. We apply it to our own lives and trust in it.

It means believing that God has a wise, good sovereign plan for all of the human race, including us, and we trust in that no matter what happens. In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul said we have the all surpassing power of God in us, in the jars of clay that we are. These ordinary lives. But how does that power get displayed? In verses 8-9 Paul said, “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”

Like Naomi, what we most need to do is trust God even when we life is painful. In his book, *Celebrating The Wrath Of God,* Jim McGuigan wrote that in tough times we must decide, “We won’t join the peevish deserters who serve God as long as they see him as the best meal ticket in the universe.” We commit to be the people who say, “Here is one person who believes, who knows God is good and will trust him no matter what happens.”

Bill Fix is a pastor in Michigan. He talks about how poor his parents were. Life was hard. His Dad worked two jobs just to keep them afloat. Mom worked hard taking care of the home. He said his Mom had such faith in God, so much joy in each day, that as kids they never knew they were poor. His mom constantly hummed and sang as she went through her days taking care of the kids. Then came the devastating news that she had cancer, and it was terminal. Bill said she just went on humming. She told him this world was not her home, that she had a home in heaven where she would be just fine. She never stopped singing. He said “In her affliction she became radiant.” She had a faith that was real, and he says she is a big part of why he is a pastor today. She had impact through living with inspiring faith in the goodness, love and sovereignty of Almighty God.