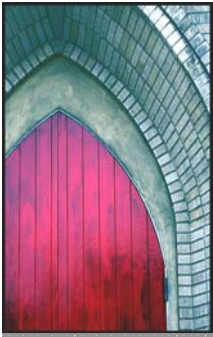


# "A SON HAS BEEN BORN TO NAOMI" *The Redemption of a Mother*

SCRIPTURE TEXT: RUTH 4.13-22



Rev. Jon Dunning  
May 14 2006

Oak Hills  
Presbyterian Church,  
Overland Park,

## HAPPY MOTHERS' DAY!

One of the pastoral revelations I've had repeatedly over the last (almost) 3 years is that that holidays are rarely simple for most of us. They often involve extended periods of time with people who have hurt us, or with whom we just don't get along. For others of us, holidays are a stark reminder of what we don't have. We convince ourselves that whatever 'normal' is according to the people around us, we are not it. Please don't hear me apologize for this day: there is something right about acknowledging the call of motherhood in a world in which is often very confused about this vocation.

We do need to be honest, though, that even something as good as this holiday can be challenging.

The question before us this morning, then is: when you find yourself there, where does it take you? In the midst of these circumstances, where do you find yourself retreating from people? Putting it slightly differently, when it feels like God is against us, how can we know that He is for us?

## RUTH 4.13-22

<sup>13</sup>So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. And he went in to her, and the LORD gave her conception, and she bore a son. <sup>14</sup>Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! <sup>15</sup>He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." <sup>16</sup>Then Naomi took the child and laid him on her lap and became his nurse. <sup>17</sup>And the women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

<sup>18</sup>Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, <sup>19</sup>Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, <sup>20</sup>Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, <sup>21</sup>Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, <sup>22</sup>Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

## TWO WHOLE DAYS IN THE CAR!

When I was growing up, family vacation meant one thing: two days in our van with my family driving to North Carolina to visit my extended family. Before I knew any better, I was as excited about the driving time as I was about seeing my cousins and swimming at the beach where we stayed. I loved seeing different places (I can remember arguing the benefits of driving over flying with my friends), getting to eat out all the time on the road, and curling up in my seat reading and listening to music. In strange way, I saw our driving days as 'the vacation within the vacation.' I can't help but wonder if I would have been just as satisfied with two days in the car that ended back

at our own front door as I was with driving to see family and enjoy a vacation. Looking back, it sound ridiculous to me to think that I looked forward to the beginning of the trip, the 'getting there' as much as I did the vacation itself. In fact, in many ways it seems wrong that I would see as the goal of the whole vacation the very beginning part, instead of the actual time of rest and fun.

When suffering enters our lives, something similar happens to us. We live as if our goal in those circumstances is that we would be at a place where we can say 'God is in control of my life—even in these hard times'. And that's all we're looking for. The profession that God is sovereign even over our suffering. But is this all God wants for us as His children?

Did you hear Naomi's profession of God's sovereignty in her life? She acknowledges that God is aware of and in control of every situation in her life. Remember her circumstances: famine, moving to another country, the death of her husband, and finally the death of her two sons. Her self-assessment in chapter 1 is that "the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty . . . the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me" [1.20-21]. If we were Naomi's friends, we might be quick to disagree. We need to see the partial truth in this confession—God's guiding hand is behind everything in Naomi's life. Nothing that has happened to Naomi (or to us) is a surprise to Him. This is the appropriate starting place for encountering suffering.

The problem is when this partial truth is understood as a complete truth (and therefore stands as an untruth). We can end up very orthodox, and yet very bitter. We might even sound very sober and spiritual by acknowledging the presence of pain in the world in which we live, but if we simply resign ourselves to lives of brokenness, we face the temptation of embracing a despair that is contrary to the Gospel. The message of the book of Ruth is that in our suffering, and in fact even in our joy, living in the freedom and hope of the Gospel comes not merely through believing in God's sovereign power over everything thing, but through His call for us to pursue one another, even in our suffering.

## LOVING IN SUFFERING

One of the ways in which God's sovereignty serves as the starting place for facing suffering—and not merely an abrupt ending place to our experience—is through the call for us to love those who are experiencing suffering. It is often inconvenient, costly, and even unfair. And yet, through his guiding hand God calls us toward one another in love.

We see this call most directly through Ruth's pursuit of Naomi. Having lost everything, Naomi instructed her daughters-in-law to return to their own people, for she had nothing to offer [1.8-13]. After much protestation and many tears, Orpah relented, but Ruth stayed. Remember that Ruth was part of a nation that had repeatedly stood against God's people as they wandered in the wilderness, and even in the early days of their establishment as a nation. There is no way that this relationship

would have happened in any other way other than through God's sovereign crafting of events.

The text doesn't give us any indication as to what this relationship looked like, other than that Ruth "clung to" Naomi [1.14]. Naomi's plan was to head back to Israel, where the famine was over [1.6], and Ruth went with her. When we have opportunity to love those who are suffering, we are often tempted to stand at a distance; to say nothing out of fear of saying the wrong thing. And yet, the model set before us here is that of shedding tears over shared experience and offering a loving presence to someone in need.

## SERVING IN SUFFERING

The other 'side' of this call is the call to serve others even in the midst of our own suffering. This call is not limited to those times we feel that we have enough strength, wisdom, and resources to offer to love and serve someone else well. This pattern appears in the account of Ruth and Naomi through Naomi's pursuit of Ruth and in particular in the way she served her daughter-in-law even in the midst of her own grief. If this, then, is our call, how can we pursue others in our weakness?

A helpful starting place for us is admitting our reluctance and even inability to serve others. This was certainly the position Naomi was in. According to the Law, if Naomi had other unmarried sons it would be their responsibility to marry the widows and preserve their brothers' line. But notice Naomi's words to Orpah and Ruth: "Turn back . . . go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. If I should say I have hope, even if I should have a husband this night and should bear sons, would you therefore wait till they were grown? Would you refrain from marrying?" [1.12-13]. From her perspective she had nothing to offer Ruth.

What is the next step for serving? One of my favorite movies tells the story of a reluctant super-hero wrestling with his identity. When he finally admits to himself that he has unique abilities, he asks his mentor "What am I supposed to do?" His mentor responds "Go to where people are. You won't have to look very long. It's all right to be afraid . . . because this part won't be like a comic book. Real life doesn't fit into little boxes that were drawn for it."

This illustrates closely Naomi's 'pursuit' of Ruth. Serving others is often as simple as our moving toward one another. We are often intimidated by the fear of not knowing what to say, of not being able to fix the situation. And yet, that's not the point. Because God is sovereign over everything, it's not our job to fix anything. The call is to extend love and service to those in need, even in our weakness.

## REDEMPTION IN SUFFERING

In the midst of God's sovereign care for us, even in the midst of our suffering—as He calls us to pursue each other in love and service—God ultimately calls us to this in order to challenge us to look away from ourselves and to the hope of His redemption.

One of the ways we do this is by submitting to the reality that God's healing in our lives often comes through the most unexpected of means. For Naomi, notice how this happened: it was through the birth of a boy to whom she had at best a very distant connection. But hear again the words of the women of Naomi's village: "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be

renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age . . . A son has been born to Naomi" [4.14-15]. She could not have planned this. And yet here is outworking of God's healing in her life.

Does the book of Ruth guarantee that every hurt that we face will be completely fixed? None of us need to look very far to see that this world is not as it should be. In the words of Paul Simon, "The thought that life could be better is woven indelibly into our hearts and our bones." The question remains for us, though, what is there for us? How do we know that God is indeed working His redemption into our lives?

Ultimately, we see this through the great purpose with which He worked to display his love by entering into our suffering as a servant. Notice where the book of Ruth ends. Ruth, from Moab, was used by God to preserve the line of David . . . which was the line of Christ [cf Mt 1]. In Christ, the awaited Messiah, God entered into our suffering. If the beginning of wrestling with our suffering is seeing God's sovereignty more clearly, the path that must follow is through the cross. God's son was beaten, mocked and put to death as a criminal. And it all happened through these two grieving widows.

Our call is to embrace this hope of redemption. But as we learn to love and serve each other, our hope is not that God removes the hurt that we have faced as if it never happened. God has the power to raise the dead. God has the power to heal disease. But He does not always choose to do so in this life-time. That is why loving and serving isn't about fixing anything. The promise that we have is that God is at work in His world and in His people, and no expression of evil or calamity can hinder that work.

## EACH FOR THE OTHER

As I acknowledged earlier, this may be a difficult day for many of us. Some wrestle to know why they are not yet mothers. Others wrestle with the call of mothering in very difficult circumstances. And still others are wrestling with the frustration of living out unmet expectations, even if those expectations are impossible. There are no easy answers here, but our starting place is God's sovereignty over our suffering, and working through His call to pursue one another.

One of the enduring memories I have of my mom is watching and listening as she sat across our kitchen table from total strangers or was engrossed in a long phone call while my sister and I played in the next room. A few years before I was born, my parents lost a child—he was still-born. I became increasingly aware of the profound effect this had on my mom. She ended up getting connected with a organization that ministered to parents who had lost children of all ages.

This is another picture of a grieving mother ministering in her weakness out of the hope that even in tragedy God's promises remain true. I see in my mom a commitment not only to her own family, but in her commitment to love those around us outside of our family who found themselves hurting. By loving and serving, she was looking and guiding others toward redemption.

The call of the gospel is that we are not left to ourselves, that if we are followers of Christ, we have each other. One of the themes of the book is that we are called to pursue one another in relationship because it is often through one another that God meets us with His grace. When it feels like God is against you, it takes the pursuit of others to remind us that He is for us.