

“Facing a Bitter Harvest?”

Ruth 1: 1-18

Series: The Story Chapter 9. The Faith of a Foreign Woman

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I would be willing to wager we could divide this room in to two kinds of people. Those of us who adore their mother- in-law. And those of us...not so much.

Me? I have a really soft spot for my mother-in-law. It’s just been freshly dug behind the shed.

She’s a piece of work, my mother-in-law. You know how she changes a light bulb? Just holds it up there and waits for the world to revolve around her.

You can’t play poker with her – She’s got more chips on her shoulder than on the table!

All kidding aside – I do adore my mother-in-law. I should interject here she lives 3,000 miles away. She has a great sense of humor and has never been anything but loving and gracious to me. She was even so gracious as to give me her blessing to make disparaging remarks about her for the sake of setting up this message.

But I know there are plenty of us who don’t find our in-laws adorable. In- law relationships are tough – particularly mother-in-law and daughter in law relationships. According to a 2013 Huffington Post article:

New research confirms what many new wives have long known: relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are really stressful.

89 mothers were asked about their greatest worries when their children married. Research found that the mothers overwhelmingly reported more uncertainty and insecurity when their sons married than when their daughters married.

The mothers reported worrying about their sons' well-being, and said they feared their sons wouldn't visit as often after marriage. They also felt concerned that their daughters-in-law would change their sons. (***Mother-In-Law, Daughter-In-Law Relationship Tension Explained:*** http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/22/mother-in-law_n_3315253.html)

I would like to go on record now as saying” I would never meddle or interfere with my daughter - in- law’s life!” And I never will. Because my son is never getting married.

Today we are talking about a very A-typical in-law relationship – the relationship between Ruth and her mother in law Naomi. This book of the bible, Ruth, reads almost like a short love story, covering a full range of some of the rawest human emotions: grief, bitterness, humility and redemption. All packed into 85 versus. And here’s something I found very interesting about this book: not one line of dialogue is attributed to God. In every previous chapter of The Story we’ve read God is speaking. God spoke to Adam and Eve, to Abraham to Noah, to Moses to Joshua. And here? Not a word. Why? And what do we do when we don’t hear God’s voice?

When the story opens we find Naomi, her husband Elimelech and their 2 sons in Moab. They are not Moabites. They are in fact Israelites from Bethlehem but because of terrible drought and famine there they have taken refuge in Moab. And not long after they settle there, Elimelech dies. Naomi is a now single mom raising 2 sons in a foreign land. She is grieving, she is most likely exhausted. And she probably longed for her sons to marry nice Jewish girls. Instead they marry Ruth and Orpah who are Moabites.

Not only is Ruth not Jewish, Moabites, pagan idol worshipers, and Israelites generally despised each other. So Ruth is not the ideal match for her son.

It speaks to Ruth's character and loving nature that Naomi not only allows the marriage to this foreign woman, she embraced it and Ruth. And Ruth embraced her new family. She turns from the idol worship of her people and embraces God and the Jewish way of life.

Then Ruth's husband dies. And not long after so does his brother. The second most horrific loss one can endure after the death of a child is the death of a spouse. Naomi has had to endure all this grief 3x over.

And to make matters worse she and her two daughter-in-laws, who are also grieving, are in a really difficult situation - three widows, no relatives in town, in a time of famine. Moab once seemed like a land of possibilities but Naomi has only reaped a bitter harvest there. And she's got some chips on her shoulder as a result. When she learns there is food again in Israel she decides to return to her homeland.

So the 3 widows begin the difficult journey to Bethlehem. Until Naomi has a change of heart.

“Go back, each of you to your mother's home. May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. May the Lord grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” (Ruth 1:8)

All three are weeping and Ruth and Orpah plead with her, but as Naomi sees it, she has nothing more to offer the other two women. It is better they go home to Moab, she thinks, so she can suffer alone.

“Return home daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me – even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons – would you wait until they grew up? Would remain unmarried for them? No my daughters. It is more bitter for me than you because the Lord 's hand has turned against me!” (Ruth 1:11-13)

Naomi, just as people often do when they are grieving and embittered, pushes away the very ones who offer her comfort and love. It's what I call a Kindness Conundrum. That's when people so desperately need to be treated kindly. But they have a tendency to put those offering kindness on the defensive. It takes a great deal of humility and empathy so see past the broken, bitter exterior.

Orpah gets the message and turns toward home, but Ruth, whose name means “friendship”, clings to Naomi. Four times Naomi tells her “Go back to your people.” But Ruth is steadfast.

Not because Ruth doesn’t get the message. She really and truly loves her mother-in-law as her family and God who she came to know through them. We could speculate that in insisting she go with Naomi Ruth sacrificed her home in Moab, her land and her people, but the greater and worse sacrifice for Ruth would be losing Naomi and what remained of her newly adopted family.

Often we treat our family (including in-laws!) worse than we treat our friends or even strangers. But Ruth commits her life and future to Naomi:

“Do not force me to abandon you or to turn back from following you.
Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.
Your people will be my people and your God 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 anything but death separate you and me.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

Isn’t that beautiful? Ruth understands that Naomi is more than the culmination of her past misfortunes, her present circumstances and her bitterness as a result. Ruth pledges to stand by her and believes Naomi can get back to the woman she was if she allowed Ruth to love and support her. Ruth expressed a God-like love for Naomi – one that, through the high and through the lows of life, never let’s go.

The greeting they receive on their arrival in Bethlehem leads me to believe grief and bitterness have taken a toll on Naomi’s appearance. The women in town question: “Can this be Naomi?”

“Don’t call me Naomi, (which means sweet)” she snaps. “Call me Mara (which means bitter), because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me.” (Ruth 1:20-21)

Naomi gives voice to her broken heart and bitterness. Woe is me! What did she do to deserve this heartache? Naomi believes God has turned his back on her and that’s the story she’s bitterly sticking to.

Are you experiencing a “Naomi” time in your life? We all will have them. A time when all you seem to be doing just reaps a bitter harvest? A time you are convinced that God is not for you but against you?

I don’t believe God afflicts us with heartache. Nor does he, as Naomi believes, make our lives bitter. **But he does allow the circumstances that cause heartache.** And there will be times in our lives when we won’t hear his voice. It’s not an accident that not a line of dialogue is attributed to him in the chapter. But he was then, and he still is, at work, through our circumstances and through other people in our lives.

It’s worth repeating – in this world we will have trouble. It’s how we chose to handle those times of affliction and heartache – those times we don’t hear his voice – that determines our response.

Do we allow ourselves to be swallowed up with self-pity – letting the bitterness of past hurts and losses sour the sweeter things in life God wants to give us? As babies we instinctively prefer sweet tastes. But here’s the thing about bitterness when we dwell on it — we acquire a taste for it. We develop a taste for self-pity when on the way we’ve been wronged, our burdens and the trials we have to endure.

Do you know it only takes one tablespoon of lemon juice to make 8 ounces of milk sour? And if you have you ever mistakenly taken a slug of sour milk then you know that even after you spit it out there’s work to do to get that taste out of your mouth. And the memory of that taste out of your mind.

Even if you feel God is far away from your circumstances I promise ***there are people in your life like Ruth who God can love you through – whatever it is you’re facing. People who God will use to speak to you.*** People who want to lift you up in your grief and sorrow and want help you cover your bitter with sweet. You have to stop pushing them away and allow them to come alongside you, love and support you.

Or maybe you know someone like Naomi who God is calling you to love. Somebody with so many chips on their shoulder you can’t get your arm around them? It takes a great deal of compassion and humility to remain steadfast and loyal when someone is telling us to go away. God wants us to push past that bitterness and show kindness even when someone is spewing sour milk at us.

Remember what that Huffpost article said made the mother-in-law relationships so stressful? Mother’s feeling: ***Uncertainty and insecurity, worry, fear and concern.*** These people are hurting. Offer to share their agony and remind them their not alone.

Naomi had every reason to be feeling uncertain, insecure and afraid. For once they settle in Bethlehem their prospects for survival were slim. With no land to grow food and no family to support them, this pair of widows was forced to rely on charity. God’s Law commanded that landowners were not to harvest their fields all the way to the edges. The wheat and barley along the border, the sheaves or grapes that drop to the ground must be left for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the foreigner to gather or “glean.” So Ruth, to support them, takes to a nearby field where she gleans the remains of the harvest.

Gleaning is hard labor for anyone, especially for widowed women in foreign country. She must have been seen as poor and vulnerable – an easy mark for harassment or abuse. We know Ruth is kind and committed and a get-the gleaning- done-kind of girl. Scripture tells us she takes only short breaks from her work and the hot sun in a shelter near the fields. Her work ethic catches the eye of Boaz, owner of the field and a relative of Naomi’s late husband. He asks around about her. He is intrigued by her back story. So he arranges a meeting. He offers her priority gleaning, protection and a cool drink.

Ruth questions his motivation. “Why have I found favor in your eyes that you notice me – a foreigner? I am lower than one of your servant girls’ (Ruth 3: 10)

Boaz replied, “I have heard how you left your parents and your homeland to live among people who are strangers. And you did this all out of love for your mother-in-law after your husband died. You have come to seek shelter under the wings of our God. May he richly bless you and repay you for all your sacrifice, for all you have done.” (Ruth 3:11-12)

This encounter and subsequent relationship is the paradigm shift for Naomi, Ruth, Boaz and for you and me. It wasn't that Boaz simply *saw* her. If that was the case he would have seen she was not Jewish, she was a foreigner, she was not a virgin, but a widow, she was not wealthy; she was less than a servant girl. Boaz saw that Ruth was more than an outsider – more than the culmination of her past misfortunes and present circumstances. You see Boaz would know a little something about being an outsider himself. His mother Rahab was the prostitute who provided cover for Joshua's spies when they were scoping out Canaan. Rahab risked her life and as a result was adopted into the family of Israel. Boaz too takes a risk on Ruth. He honors the Godly woman she is within and the woman that she will become if she allows him to love and support her. She does. They marry and God blesses them with a son.

This son is a blessing to Naomi as well – another vessel God uses to cover her bitter with sweet. He is a descendant of her late husband Elimilech, and he will become her guardian and redeemer. And this is where God's Upper Story and Lower Story connect. This son's name is Obed who grows up to have a son named Jesse who in turn has a son named David who becomes the great king David, ancestor to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So...a prostitute, a Moabite, a foreigner and widow are part of Jesus' family tree?

Yes. Because Jesus himself an outsider, a carpenter not a King, came for all people. He came for the righteous and the Rahabs, the Ruths, the Naomis. He came to be guardian and redeemer for the sweet, the bitter and the broken – you and me.

Kayla Jean Muller dedicated her life to helping others – to humanitarian aid in this country and around the world.

“Helping, her mother said, was something that she was called to do.”

Mueller was looking for ways to help Syrian refugees when she was abducted on a street in Aleppo in August of 2013. News of her death in Syria was confirmed last month. She was 26 years old. For months her family kept her abduction a secret fearing publicity would put her at more risk. Now it was a shared agony.

At a candlelight vigil for her on February 14, Mueller's family pastor, said he hoped the gathering would help bring strength to the family "I would hope you feel loud and clear tonight that you are not alone anymore," Merrell said. "Now you've got an entire community here that just declares (that) we love you. And all of our love and our resources are here at your disposal."

"Let Kayla's heart live on through all of us and the people that she has touched in her life," he said. "Do what she would do. If you see somebody struggling, you see somebody upset, go give them a hug.

Friends, if you're facing a bitter harvest – you are not alone. No one is an outsider in God's family. You've got an entire community here who want to help. Let it come along side you and support you. Let others wrap their arms around you. If you're grieving a loss or have experienced a loss and gone through the grieving process and want to help those that are grieving consider attending or helping with Griefshare.

Or connect with a growth group where you can pray with and for others and share God's word. Or join the group the Helping Hands ministry where you can be put in touch with people who are struggling and need help. Or do something even easier – take a post it note and offer someone words of encouragement or comfort.

Do what Kayla would do. Do what Ruth did. Let God use you to sow seeds of compassion. It's the sweetest thing you can do.