

Nov. 1, 2009
Ruth 1:1-18
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Good Grief

These next three weeks we are going to be looking at the story of Ruth. The book of Ruth in the Hebrew Scriptures is a short story that is only four chapters long. So I would encourage you sometime this month to read the whole story at one sitting. Although there are parts of this story that we know well, there are other aspects that we often overlook. One of those aspects is the profound grief expressed at the beginning of the story.

In the first chapter the three women in the story – Naomi, the mother-in-law, and her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah – are all women of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Each of their husbands has died. Good grief! That’s a lot for one family to deal with.

The women respond differently to their grief, as all people do, because grief is a very personal, very intimate experience, and people are different. Orpah returns to her family of origin, to what is familiar with her. Ruth chooses the opportunity of a new adventure and pledges to go with Naomi back to Bethlehem. *Where you go, I will go...*

Your people will be my people,

Naomi is the one apparently who is most overwhelmed by her grief, which is not surprising considering that her children have died as well as her husband. The lectionary reading ends at verse 18. The verses that follow are difficult ones in that they express the depth of Naomi’s anguish and grief. Maybe there are days when she is doing OK, when she especially feels supported by Ruth’s company. But when she arrives back in Bethlehem a wave of grief overwhelms her. She says to the townspeople,

Do not call me Naomi.

Call me Mara (which means bitter) For the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

Grief does come in waves, often when we least expect it – a song, a fragrance, a special place - and suddenly our hearts ache and our bodies are heavy. Grief is exhausting work. In some parts of the world they have wailing walls and keening circles where people gather to give voice to the passions of the soul, but we in good New England stoic fashion tend to crawl off by ourselves and shut the door. We might be wise to remember the shortest verse in the Bible. It is found in the gospel of John, chapter 11, in the story about the death of Lazarus. It simply says, “Jesus wept.” Tears are a powerful force for healing.

One time when our children were little and I was crying and telling my children that it wasn't always easy for me to cry, one of them said, "But mommy if you don't cry, it makes you sick." Out of the mouths of babes. Expressing grief is good for it honors those we love and helps to heal our aching hearts. When we block tears and grief too long those emotions tend to come out sideways in unhealthy ways in our lives at some later time.

So how do we live with grief and keep going? One day when a group of us were talking about this, Elizabeth Knowles shared with us these words by Elizabeth Vining that have become important to her in her own journey.

Grief is something not to overcome, but to live with. It is always there, but one can make room for it, recognize it as a companion instead of an intruder, be aware of it, but not possessed by it; one can continue one's work, one's occupations, even one's joys in its presence. Elizabeth G. Vining

As people often say to me, "It doesn't necessarily get better, but it gets different." Grief becomes a companion, another part of one's life. We can still enjoy the seasons, laugh as well as cry, dance as well as mourn.

People who have the privilege of living a long time know very well the companionship of grief, for they have had to say goodbye to so many. One day Norman Marriner (who's in his 90's) and I were talking about all those who have gone before him – a spouse, two children, and many friends. Rather wistfully, he said, "No one calls me Mike, anymore." His friends had always called him Mike. I know there are a few of you who still do call him Mike, but it was a way of expressing how many had left. It reminded me of a prayerful reflection I came across many years ago entitled,

Minnie Remembers

*God, my hands are old.
I've never said that out loud before
but they are.
I was so proud of them once.
They were soft like the velvet smoothness
of a firm, ripe peach.
Now the softness is more like worn out
sheets or withered leaves.
When did these slender, graceful hands
become gnarled, shrunken claws?
When, God?
They lie here in my lap,
naked reminders of this worn-out body that has served me too well!*

*How long has it been
since someone touched me.
Twenty years?
Twenty years I've been a widow.
Respected.
Smiled at.
But never touched.
Never held so close that loneliness was blotted out.*

*I remember how my mother
used to hold me, God.
When I was hurt in spirit or flesh,
She would gather me close, stroke my
 silky hair and caress my back with her
 warm hands. O God, I'm so lonely!*

*I remember the first boy
who ever kissed me.
We were both so new at that
The taste of young lips and popcorn,
 the feeling inside of mysteries to come.*

*I remember Hank and the babies.
How else can I remember them
but together?
Out of the fumbling, awkward attempts
 of new lovers came the babies.
And as they grew, so did our love.
And, God, Hank didn't seem to mind if
 my body thickened and faded a little.
He still loved it. And touched it.
And we didn't mind if we were no longer
 beautiful.
And the children hugged me a lot.
O God, I'm lonely!*

*God, why didn't we raise the kids to be
 silly and affectionate as well as
 dignified and proper?
You see, they do their duty.
They drive up in their fine cars;
They come to my room to pay their
respects.
They chatter brightly, and reminisce.*

*But they don't touch me.
They call me "Mom" or "Mother" or "Grandma."*

*Never Minnie.
My mother called me Minnie.
So did my friends.
Hanks called me Minnie, too.
But they're gone.
And so is Minnie.
Only Grandma is here.
And God! She's lonely!*

(Donna Swanson, *Images: Women in Transition*, compiled by Janice Grana, The Upper Room, 1976)

Being a widow or widower brings about a new life experience, including the companionship of grief. Someone recently was telling me that she had found she didn't like the word widow to describe her new situation. A friend had suggested to her the Italian word, *vedova*. It has more flair she said.

At the heart of the Christian gospel is the witness that Jesus knows our common lot. He is a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. He has journeyed into the fullness of death, and as the Risen Christ was present with his followers and is present to us still. His message over and over again was and is
"Peace be with you."

In all life's seasons and circumstances Christ offers us peace and the presence of God's spirit to walk with us, and even to carry us when necessary.

We are also given one another – to bear one another's burdens. May we clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another. May we clothe ourselves in the love and peace of Christ, which binds everything together in heaven and on earth.