

## What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do – 5. Celebrating God's Grace

Ruth 4:13-17

May 21, 2023

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Good morning, beloveds. This morning we gather for worship to hear the promises of God for our lives and our world, and to do so in the company of our faith community. Every week as we gather for worship, we bring our whole selves: our questions and doubts, our worries and hopes, our excitement and longings. As a body of Christ, we hold them all together – we hold one another together for each other. This means, that when I feel sadness or grief, you carry the light of hope for me. And when you feel questions and doubts, I can carry a light of trust for you. One of the beautiful things about a faith community, is that we are not required or expected to think, feel, or believe just a like. Instead, we commit to loving alike. To holding and creating space for all of us to be fully present, and to experience the blessings of God. These last four weeks, we have wrestled together with questions. We've held space for all the ways we *don't know what to do*, and held one another safely as we learn how to listen, to wait, to follow God, or as we heard last week: we held space for it to be okay when you're not okay.

Now this morning, we are closing this series, with a reminder of God's faithfulness throughout all of these questions and spaces. We'll be picking up the story of Ruth and Naomi again. Through their experiences, we'll see that God's blessings, God's faithfulness, God's hope endures always. I spent this week in downtown Minneapolis at the Festival of Homiletics – which is, basically, “preacher camp”... some 1200 pastors from around the country, across denominations, gathered to worship and hear sermon after sermon from some of the very best preachers. Three and a half days spent in worship three times each day, plus lectures between... and a little fun, too. It was inspiring and encouraging – and balm for my soul. Our theme this year was “preaching hope for a weary world” ... and friends, aren't we just that: weary and in need of hope?

Ruth and Naomi were, too. Now, I know the title of the message today is “Celebrating God's Grace” ... but here, like so often in life, I think God's grace looks and feels a whole lot like hope. *And, because the Holy Spirit doesn't always work on the same timeline as our office deadlines for submitting sermon titles...* we're going to focus this morning on just this: the way that HOPE is both the cause and effect of God's grace. Let's start with a recap of the story of Ruth and Naomi:

Naomi was an Israelite woman who, along with her husband, sons and daughters-in-law (one of whom is Ruth), moved from Bethlehem to Moab during a famine. Like millions of people around our world, they were climate refugees – leaving their homes in hopes of something more, something safe. Naomi's name means “pleasant” -- but her life in leaving Bethlehem was anything but. Instead, she experiences a series of losses, each compounding in devastation. First, she lost her homeland. Then, her husband dies. And finally, a few years later, she does the unthinkable and buries her two sons. In the space of ten years, she has gone from citizen to immigrant, local to foreigner, wife to widow, mother to bereaved. Naomi is no longer *pleasant*, but feels quite *bitter*, and declares that she will no be called Mara, a name which means bitter. This gives us a clue that Naomi felt as one without hope. How do you find your way forward when everything that brought joy and definition to your life is gone? How do you rise out of bed when your homeland, your husband, your beloved children, are all gone? This is a question, that all of us fear.... and far too many of us must answer. The truth is that throughout our lives, none of us will be spared from a grief that will cause us to feel bitter, and wonder how we might rise again. Naomi is not alone in her bitterness, trauma, and profound grief. But neither is she alone in what comes next. *Spoiler alert: what comes next is God's faithfulness and hope. Hope which both happens because of God's grace, and hope that reveals God's grace, too.*

Chinese writer, inventor and philosopher Lin YuTang once said, “Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence.” In other words, when we find ourselves in profound grief or despair. When we find ourselves lost or weary, when we don't know what else to do...

HOPE is taking that first step.

Hope is trusting, that we will find the road made from the steps of others before us.

Hope is God's grace revealed when that path is found.

The promise that we are not, and have never, been alone.

"Hope is like a road in the country; there was never a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence."

*As Pastor Tami reminded us last week, many times, taking that first next step requires help. It might look like talking with a friend, a therapist or another professional, and it might include some medications that help give us the boost to make our way along that country road. Naomi took that first next step. And she did it with the companionship of her daughter-in-law, Ruth. While Naomi tried, initially to push her away, Ruth pushed back, too. She gave Naomi this promise: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from 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 even death separates you and me." - Ruth 1:16-17*

The following verse tells us that Naomi realized Ruth was "determined" and stopped pushing her away. Sometimes hope looks like a friend, or daughter, who refuses to let us go alone. And so even though Naomi has experienced tremendous grief, she still embodied hope that God's grace would continue to be present to her. Just as it was already through Ruth. Together, Ruth and Naomi journeyed to Bethlehem. Naomi had heard that the famine had ended, and Bethlehem was once again a place living up to its name, which means "house of bread". This may be a little literary signal to us as well, that Ruth and Naomi are moving literally, spiritually and physically, from a time of famine and loss to a place of plenty: to the house of bread, Bethlehem. I'm sure their walk was filled with anticipation and sadness. The last time they had walked this road there were six. And now, just two remained. Moreover, they were poor women without means of supporting themselves. Women walking with hope, trusting in God's faithfulness.

Once they arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth goes out to the fields, looking to glean the fields. This was a practice of picking grain left behind along the edges of the field. In modern times, this might look like frugal folks who dumpster dive outside of shops, looking for cases of perfectly good food thrown away. Or like those who give and receive on "Buy Nothing" facebook groups. It also looks a bit like Second Harvest, who collect donated and rescued food in large quantities – and distribute to food shelves around the metro. But for Ruth and Naomi, this practice was rooted in Mosaic law: commands from God to the Hebrew people about how they are to care for one another, and especially those who are on the margins. God told the people to leave wide margins in the fields unharvested, so that the poor, the immigrant, and the traveler would have something to eat. This was an act of justice and grace, but also stewardship. It's a way of recognizing that all we have belongs to God, and by giving a portion of this away, it shows gratitude.

But stewardship, whether the dollars we donate each month, or the corners left unharvested in our fields – are intricately intertwined with God's justice and grace. We can't separate them from each other. Whether we receive, like Ruth, the gifts of the field. Or we are the farmer, who makes wide our margin... This is an experience of God's grace, a revelation of God's hope. Gifts of food given freely, without earning or deserving, or even asking for it. That is grace. But they are also gifts of the field freely given out of love of God and love of neighbor. That is stewardship and justice. And these are gifts of the field freely given, imagining a world where all are fed. This is hope.

And so Ruth finds herself in the field of a man named Boaz. Boaz is a distant relative of Naomi. And seeing Ruth, he tells his workers to both protect her, and to leave a wider margin – so that she has even more food. Boaz went above and beyond God's law. He not only followed the letter of this law, but he also followed the spirit of it. That is, to love and provide for your neighbor in need. We're reminded of the many ways Jesus cared for those on the margins and most vulnerable. Jesus, too, embodied not just the letter of the law, but the Spirit. Inviting the broken to be healed, the forgotten to be seen, the cast aside to be welcomed. We are called

to be people like Boaz, too. Those who see people in need and act in loving care. *Emily Dickenson said, "hope is a thing with feathers"* -- a reminder that hope is something that lives within and around us, singing and fluttering in times of difficulty. We, the church, are called to be those feathers – fluttering, comforting, and declaring that God is here among us, here with you.

The road Naomi and Ruth walked was coming more and more into existence. And they weren't finished yet. But neither was Boaz. Because next, Boaz becomes the Kinsman-redeemer to Ruth and Naomi. This is your vocabulary lesson for today: a "kinsman-redeemer" is a male relative who, according to the laws of Moses, has the privilege and responsibility to protect and care for someone in trouble. This role is created by God and seen in Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus. In other words: because Naomi is a distant relative, and she and Ruth have no men in their lives to be their provider and protector – Boaz accepts this privilege. Boaz again shows faithfulness to God, by loving and caring for these women. *Side note: If you have a middle schooler downstairs today, or you know and love a middle schooler downstairs today with Sami... ask them about this "kinsman redeemer" -- because they are learning about this word, and story, too.*

And so, skipping now over a little of the story (*it's short – the whole book only 4 chapters – you can read it, too*). Boaz and Ruth are married. Then, as we heard in our reading today – they have son. When this child is born, Ruth and Naomi are surrounded by women of their community. These two, who had lost everything: their homelands, their husbands, their futures. Had walked with hope along that country road, being created over time by those who walked with them. But now, they have a new community around them. They are surrounded by midwives and neighbors, aunties and friends. People who will continue to walk with Ruth and Naomi, who will uphold them, who will love this child, who will continue to speak God's goodness and grace to them. And on this day, when Ruth's son is born – they see him as a sign of God's faithfulness. A tangible sign of hope revealed.

The women praise God for Ruth and for her son. They declare that this child is a sign of God's redeeming work. And then, this beautiful community of women – they name the son of Ruth and Boaz, calling him Obed. This child, will become the grandfather to David ... the little boy with a slingshot who defeated Goliath. The Shepherd who wrote hundreds of songs, collected as our book of Psalms. The King, who through his own ups and downs, experienced the country road of hope, too.

Now, I want to be careful and say this: Ruth's story isn't a happy ending like a classic rom-com, where everything is tied up neatly at the end with a wedding and a baby, as if those are the only ways we experience happiness or fulfilling lives. Even though it *can* look like that at a glance. But what's happening here – is a story for us about two women who lost everything, who could have easily given up, who might have been angry with God forever. But instead, they packed up that grief, anger, and sadness, and carried it with them along a road, created and built with hope. As they walked, trusting that God would be with them, they found their way home. Their hearts still felt the loss of Naomi's husband and sons. That will never go away. But they have learned, that these losses, that even the greatest and most painful deaths in their lives – do not mean the end. Even when there seems to be no way, God will be their hope. God will be their grace. God will be their way. In Bethlehem, among the edges of the fields, through the faithfulness of Boaz, and welcoming of a new community – hope swirled around them, taking on flesh and living among them. Oh, and by the way? Obed, son of Ruth, grandfather of David... among his descendants someday, will be Jesus. Christ, the redeemer of our world, is born in Bethlehem, in the lineage of Ruth and Boaz. Born to the family of Naomi. Born to the women and men who walked roads of hope with courage.

What do we do when we don't know what to do?

*(The big question of our last five weeks?)*

We listen and wait. We trust that it's okay to not be okay.

And through it all? We hold on to hope.

We walk along the road, waiting and watching as it comes into existence.

Because here, along the way we will find God's grace always, and already with us.

Let us pray: God of grace. God of hope. Thank you for showing and teaching us about your faithfulness through the story of Ruth and Naomi. Thank you for being present to us always, and offering to us your abundant grace. Amen.

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 21, 2023**

### **Weekly Prayer**

Loving God, thank you for being with me through every step of the storms of life. You go before me, and you know what lies ahead. For this, I place my trust in you. Help me to wholly lean on you. Into your care, I place my worries, hopes, and burdens. For your unwavering love and care: thank you. In Christ's name, Amen.

### **Monday, May 22**

#### **Scripture - Ruth 4:13-17**

So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. He was intimate with her, the LORD let her become pregnant, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi, "May the LORD be blessed, who today hasn't left you without a redeemer. May his name be proclaimed in Israel. He will restore your life and sustain you in your old age. Your daughter-in-law who loves you has given birth to him. She's better for you than seven sons." Naomi took the child and held him to her breast, and she became his guardian. The neighborhood women gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They called his name Obed. He became Jesse's father and David's grandfather.

#### **Observation**

The book of Ruth begins with the death of Naomi's husband and sons. Amid her grief, Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem, to seek comfort and support. Ruth decides to go with her, famously declaring, "where you go, I will go" (1:16-17). Once home, they are met with community. Eventually Ruth marries and gives Naomi a family once more. Their grief, while profound, was met with God's presence and blessings.

#### **Application**

None of us are spared times of profound grief in our lives. Throughout scripture, God promises to be present to us in the valleys, shadows, and pits of despair. Reflecting on your life, how have you experienced God's presence and blessings amid times of suffering or grief?

#### **Prayer**

God of Grace, keep my heart open to noticing and celebrating your presence in my life. Remind me of your faithfulness and keep my 'heart tuned to your grace'. Amen.

### **Tuesday, May 23**

#### **Scripture - Matthew 1:1-17**

A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham:

Abraham was the father of Isaac.

Isaac was the father of Jacob.

Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers.

Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.

Perez was the father of Hezron.

Hezron was the father of Aram.

Aram was the father of Amminadab.

Amminadab was the father of Nahshon.

Nahshon was the father of Salmon.

Salmon was the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab.  
Boaz was the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.  
Obed was the father of Jesse.  
Jesse was the father of David the king.  
David was the father of Solomon, whose mother had been the wife of Uriah.  
Solomon was the father of Rehoboam.  
Rehoboam was the father of Abijah.  
Abijah was the father of Asaph.  
Asaph was the father of Jehoshaphat.  
Jehoshaphat was the father of Joram.  
Joram was the father of Uzziah.  
Uzziah was the father of Jotham.  
Jotham was the father of Ahaz.  
Ahaz was the father of Hezekiah.  
Hezekiah was the father of Manasseh.  
Manasseh was the father of Amos.  
Amos was the father of Josiah.  
Josiah was the father of Jehoniah and his brothers. This was at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon:  
Jehoniah was the father of Shealtiel.  
Shealtiel was the father of Zerubbabel.  
Zerubbabel was the father of Abiud.  
Abiud was the father of Eliakim.  
Eliakim was the father of Azor.  
Azor was the father of Zadok.  
Zadok was the father of Achim.  
Achim was the father of Eliud.  
Eliud was the father of Eleazar.  
Eleazar was the father of Matthan.  
Matthan was the father of Jacob.  
Jacob was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary—of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Christ.  
So there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen generations from the exile to Babylon to the Christ.

### **Observation**

As you read Matthew's account of the genealogy of Jesus, what do you notice? In a long list of men, there are five women mentioned. One of them is Ruth. In the ancient world, women were viewed as "less than" the men in their lives. What does the story of Ruth tell us about how God views women or other groups in our world who society views as being "less"?

### **Application**

Ancient genealogies did not list women, and yet Matthew felt that the story of Ruth was so important that she be named. Why do you think Matthew wanted to remind us of Ruth's story, when telling us Jesus' story? Who are the people you name in telling the story of your genealogy or creation? Who are the people that made an impact in forming who you are today?

### **Prayer**

God of Grace, thank you for my ancestors in faith and in life. Thank you for the ways that you have been present in our world throughout time. Help me to embody the courage and goodness of those who have gone before me, so that I might continue their legacy. Amen.

**Wednesday, May 24**

**Scripture - 2 Corinthians 12:9**

He said to me, "My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness." So I'll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ's power can rest on me.

**Observation**

We refer to God's grace often in Christian life. What is grace? As United Methodists we understand it as "the undeserved, unmerited, and loving action of God." It is a gift from God that we receive freely in our lives and world. Grace is God's gift of love and peace to us amid every circumstance of our lives.

**Application**

Often, when hard times come, we think that both the cause and solution are all on us. It's because of our faults that we land there, or it's because of our strength that we will make it right. This passage reminds us that God's grace is sufficient. It is a promise that God's loving actions will bring peace and sustenance to your life, that God's presence will be a guide through any hardship. How do you experience the undeserved, unmerited grace of God?

**Prayer**

God of Grace, help me to rely on you today. May your Holy Spirit be present in my life, revealing your grace present in and through me. Help me to trust in your guidance and love. Amen.

**Thursday, May 25**

**Scripture - Romans 5:1-5, 8**

Therefore, since we have been made righteous through his faithfulness, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand through him, and we boast in the hope of God's glory. But not only that! We even take pride in our problems because we know that trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope. This hope doesn't put us to shame, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

**Observation**

One of the ways that the evil one is present in our lives is by tempting us to believe that God has caused, or is absent in, suffering. Instead, Romans 5 reminds us that God is present to us amid our sufferings, not by causing them to happen, but by creating blessings within them. God gives us perseverance and hope in our sufferings. God provides opportunities to see God's grace and goodness, even while we suffer or grieve.

**Application**

Naomi felt such suffering after the death of her husband and sons that she declared her name to be Mara (meaning bitter, Ruth 1:20). Her suffering impacted her entire world, even how she viewed herself. And yet, God did not leave her there. Instead, God was at work to reveal new life and hope around her. In time, Naomi found herself with a new family -- one that would be part of the genealogy of Jesus. God was present to Naomi in her suffering and showed grace. It meant that the death and suffering Naomi knew was not the end. Death is never the end. Instead, the ongoing love of God made a new path for Naomi and generations to follow. What places of suffering do you experience today? Where might God be creating something new amid your grief and pain? How might you sit with God today, trusting in that promise?

## **Prayer**

God of Grace, even when I cannot see the ending, I know you are with me and guiding me through my days. Give me strength and perseverance in my sufferings and grief, that I might trust in your ongoing presence. Amen.

## **Friday, May 26**

### **Scripture - 1 Peter 4:8-11**

Above all, show sincere love to each other, because love brings about the forgiveness of many sins. Open your homes to each other without complaining. And serve each other according to the gift each person has received, as good managers of God's diverse gifts. Whoever speaks should do so as those who speak God's word. Whoever serves should do so from the strength that God furnishes. Do this so that in everything God may be honored through Jesus Christ. To him be honor and power forever and always. Amen.

### **Observation**

In my Bible, this section of scripture is titled "Living for God" and it offers a reminder to me of how God calls us to live as followers of Jesus. Its instructions include loving each other, offering hospitality to each other, and sharing our gifts with others. But it also reminds me that we do this, not to *earn* God's good favor, but *because* we have already received God's grace.

### **Application**

Being people of love, hospitality, and proclamation are three ways that we embody the grace of God already present in our lives and are faithful stewards to the gifts and presence of God. How might you show love and hospitality today? How might you share your gifts with others?

## **Prayer**

God of grace, thank you for freely giving to me your presence and love. Thank you for the gift of Jesus, who forgives and saves me. Guide me to share your love, welcome, and gifts with others. Amen.

## **Saturday, May 27**

### **Scripture - John 1:1-5**

In the beginning was the Word  
and the Word was with God  
and the Word was God.

The Word was with God in the beginning.

Everything came into being through the Word,  
and without the Word  
nothing came into being.

What came into being  
through the Word was life,  
and the life was the light for all people.

The light shines in the darkness,  
and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light.

### **Observation**

These first verses of John are both narratives of creation and of Jesus' birth which remind us that God has been present since the beginning of time, bringing life that is "the light for all people." This light, which creates and sustains the world, is not overcome by any amount of shadows or darkness.

**Application**

I love this passage for its beauty and poetic imagery, but also for its strong theology. In the same way that my boys ask for a nightlight in their rooms to ward off “bad dreams,” God tells us that God is our everlasting light that protects us. Nothing in our lives will extinguish the light of Christ. Just like my boys sometimes need a nightlight to bring them comfort, I sometimes need a reminder of God’s enduring presence, too.

**Prayer**

God of grace, you are the light of the world, and of my life. Help me to see your presence amid the scary times or shadowy places. Bring me comfort and reminders of your love. Amen.