

January 24, 2021

Pastor Lori Grasty

Love Untangled
Ruth 1:8-17 The Message

This morning, when I was thinking about the message to share, I really felt led to create a space for relaxation, finding calm, seeking centeredness.

I don't have to tell you that we are in the midst of change in the *world*, we are midst of change in the *church*, and maybe even with the start of this new year, we are in the midst of change in *ourselves* - with New Year's resolutions and the like.

So, as we are not in a sermon series and I had the opportunity to speak on whatever I chose in the few weeks leading up to Pastor Karen joining us - I wanted to explore a Bible favorite for me ...

I wanted to invite you into a **cozy space**, with expectation of God's presence among us. Hopefully you are comfortable at home with maybe a blanket, a cup of coffee.

I wanted to invite you to **relax, reflect** - let go of the worries of the world, feelings of busy-ness. I want to invite you to be **creative**, to be **open** - open to what you might be feeling, hearing, seeing ... to *breath*, to let go of *time pressures, to-do lists*.

I want to invite you to let go of the negative 'self talk' that may be running through your head. To invite you to stop, to pause, to breathe, and to seek beauty in God's presence and the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and our world.

I want to begin by sharing a story with you.

I am not sure if you are familiar with the story of Ruth. Our kids' message shared a great Bible story overview.

And if you're joining us for classic and want more, I invite you to take a look at that.

So we heard from scripture that Naomi is in a new land with her husband and their 2 sons and her 2 daughter-in-laws. Naomi and her husband are from Bethlehem and living in Moab. Here their sons have taken wives - women from Moab.

All the men die; Naomi plans to return to Bethlehem because she has no future here and sends the women off. This is what sets Ruth up to offer this powerful message of love and hope - one my favorite scriptures of all time.

Fast forward to when Naomi and Ruth are in Bethlehem ... Here's a fast overview of the storyline.

- Naomi has a relative here in Bethlehem, and there's a lot of complicated study about marriage laws of who is to take on the widows but he doesn't and after Boaz offers him the chance, he is aware and willing to help.
- Naomi tells Ruth to glean the Boaz's fields (taking the last after the crop has been picked).
- Boaz sees this shows kindness, knows Ruth's dedication
- Naomi figures a way for Ruth to not be a girl gleaning the fields but someone he meets and knows.
- He sees her, knows of her devotion to Naomi, shows kindness, eventually they are married - providing hope and future for both Ruth and Naomi
- Finally Ruth and Boaz are blessed with a great gift - a son named Obed.

I want to look at this story creatively. I want to step in this space and imagine and wonder. Let's look at this story from Obed's perspective. We were all children once here's his story.

Obed's story

You probably already know me, my people know me in our town. And if you don't, I bet you know my dad, Boaz? My name is Obed and it is said that I am the son of Naomi. But really **Naomi** is my grandmother. Why is it said that am I the son *she* was given, you may ask? Well she is faithful and she's been through a lot. And she is strong and kind. My grandmother looked out for my mother when my mother was the only family she had. Actually, they looked out for each other.

My mother's name is Ruth but she is not my grandmother's daughter. In fact, all of my grandmother's family died a while ago – her husband and both of her sons (but he was not my dad) died. It was a long time ago; before I was born. My mom and my grandmother faced the end of the world as they knew it. That's the story my grandmother tells me. She likes to tell this story of how God brought me to her and she has been blessed with a son. She was so sad when everyone died and she was living in a strange land called Moab so she wanted to come back here, to Bethlehem where she had lived before. They left when there was no food but she heard that it got better so she wanted to come back to her homeland.

My grandmother was so upset. She even changed her name to mean sadness (Mara) and she saw no hope. However, my mother was strong. She was determined and she wasn't scared. She chose to stay with my grandmother, even when my aunt left. I've never met my aunt, I've just heard about her. My mom decided to move somewhere she'd had never lived before and where people probably wouldn't like her. My grandmother says there is no way that she could have made it if it weren't for my mom. My dad says I must always respect my mom because she's so special and no one else would have done what she did. Her friends say that too which I

think says a lot and I hope my friends think like that of me one day. Together my mom and grandma came here and she learned about God.

My mom and grandmother were still scared and didn't have much food but grandma was faithful to God and my mom stuck with her – and soon they met my dad. That's when my dad says he told my mom that she was special – she was brave, and kind and that God would bless her. My mom didn't know about God then but she does now. That was before my mom and dad were married. And then I came along. Grandma says that I'm an extra special blessing from God. She never thought she'd have a son again and now we are a whole family together.

I never knew of the sad times but Grandma likes me to know about them so that I know how lucky we are to all be together. But she wants me to know that we aren't just *lucky* – we are blessed by God. We have a nice home, and a nice family and she says one day that I will probably have a son too. And maybe even that son will have a son who will have a son. But who knows? I'm not ready to have children yet but I do like the stories my grandmother shares before we pray together at night.

What we know further about this is that Obed does have children who form the line to King David, and eventually, Joseph - Mary's husband - the man who raises Jesus.

One of the unique features of Ruth's story is that God is never directly involved - and yet God's action is woven throughout - and Ruth's story speaks to love and devotion.

What is *your* story?

Where is God at work in your life that maybe you haven't noticed before?

Spark Joy

Are you familiar with Marie Kondo and the "spark joy" idea? She has a fascinating TV show and books and an organizing franchise where she goes in and completely overhauls homes from hoarding and chaos to clean and organized - it is completely freeing.

I don't know about you but I have been doing a lot of "decluttering" this year. I often do in January. There's something about a new year that brings this about.

But I started to think about and reflect on some of the things we do and hear for finding balance in the New Year and I began to wonder if we choose to keep **PEOPLE too - who only spark joy in our relationships**. (I'm not talking about abusive relationships - and truly unhealthy situations).

So often we objectify people - and objects are easy to toss.

Do we discard people who do no longer spark joy for us?? When they don't agree with us?
When they maybe are sad to be around.

Let me tell you something ... **Naomi did NOT spark joy for Ruth.**

Naomi said call me "Mara" for it means bitterness - there's no hope for me, leave me, let me be a lonely helpless widow.

Our modern culture might say

'you don't need that kind of negativity in your life'

But our Bible says the words that Ruth replies:

"Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!"

Cultural Interpretation

According to John Bracke & Karen Tye in "Teaching the Bible in the Church" there are 6 areas we must consider to overcome *cultural incompetence*. Meaning - these are the steps to go through to *process and appreciate* the cultural differences between the world we live in today and the world we know from scripture and biblical study.

Series of stages we must overcome to build **cultural competency** when studying the Bible
1 - denial, 2 - defense, 3 - minimization, 4 - acceptance, 5 - adaptation, 6 - integration

We cannot **deny** the Bible was written in a different time than our modern day. (Jesus said nothing about "spark joy" relationships).

Defense - we move past denying the cultural differences, but we build up walls against them, which prevents us from deeply engaging

Minimization - we minimize the cultural differences;

Acceptance - we recognize the cultural differences between the Bible and Elkhart, IN - or even the 21st century in the United States.

Adaptation - we not only *recognize* but *we seek a greater understanding for these differences*

Integration - our ability to be both a *"part of"* and *"a part from"* a given cultural context.

One of the areas that I think allows some of the greatest space for cultural incompetence - that we just don't begin to understand the Biblical view in comparison to the world we live in (and this "we" changes a lot depending on where you live in the US, in the world) ... is the idea of community.

A great example of this is what Boyung Lee shared about the Korean language and culture.

The direct translation of conversation she had with her students when her husband came to meet them in class:

"This is OUR husband." (her) "I'm so glad to meet you, OUR husband." (them)

She explains that "I" language is culturally awkward - though grammatically correct - there is very little use of the "I", "me", and "my" and "mine" language in their communal world view. Each person is part of a greater whole.

This is *community* to the *collective Korean* culture. Considering community from a very different perspective helps us to look at fresh eyes at our own sense of community - and to relook at a Biblical sense of community.

Now we live in a "I" world - and not just 'I' but a capital "I" in our world and language. And we must remember that the Bible was not written in a language and world with 'capital I' thinking or vocabulary.

And WE - we truly, we - must challenge ourselves when we think about *Christian community*.

Lee would suggest asking ... How **are** we? How are **WE**?

We have been through a lot this year. **We** have lost family members. **We** have learned and WE have suffered. We have been through much change.

We are like the **body** of water - an ocean - and we are connected as a church community. As a **body** of Christ.

There is a reason that the two sacraments that we partake in - communion and baptism - are only done in community. And must be done in community. Because WE are connected.

And this is a visceral connection - love in action - not a 'spark joy' kind of love nor a Hollywood kind of love.

WE don't leave people when they are done sparking joy for us - when the fleeting emotion passes.

But we love as we are loved. And God loves **us** like this - not a fleeting emotion or a “spark joy” love. But love that like an ocean - as we are connected, we are community.

We are loved - capital “We” - we as a collective body. “we” as where you begin and I end blends together - ‘we’ as a collective body of memories - of being a part of our children’s baptisms and confirmations, weddings, and funerals.

When you’re not good, I’m not good (lower case “i”).
Ruth knew ‘we’.

We are made in the image of God and God is love.
Love as an action - love is a God who sent his son because he loves us. Us. We.

Say that out loud - ‘we are loved’ and “we are love”

Our ‘we’ is going to adjust in a few weeks to welcome a new member, Pastor Karen, but “we are in this together” as a church, as a Body of Christ, as a Christian community.
And that is why WE are here. Amen.