All Together Now
Ruth 1: 1-22

It was a tough time for the people of Israel. The very first verse in the book of Ruth tells us that it was in the days of the Judges, before there was a king in Israel, when all the people did what was right in their own eyes. A famine came through, and this man from Bethlehem, Elimelech, took his family and left. They fled to Moab, where they found some food and settled in. His sons took wives for themselves, and things were starting to look up, but then Elimelech just dies. We're never given a reason for this; the Bible just says he died, and Naomi was left a widow.

They continued to live in the land, Naomi, her two sons and daughters-in-law, taking care of each other, until more tragedy happens: the two sons die, and the three women are left on their own.

It seems like that's the case sometimes, doesn't it? Something bad happens in your life, and everything comes unraveled. You pick up the pieces, and about the time you feel like it's starting to get back together, something else happens and it all falls to pieces again.

Many of us can relate to Naomi. We have known what it is like to lose a loved one- a spouse, a parent, a child- and the pain and sorrow that is there that never completely goes away.

Of course, there are things besides death that bring us grief and sorrow. We sometimes watch our loved ones walk down a path of bad decisions into places we simply cannot follow. A relationship ends, or the loss of a job, or even a thousand little things that just pile up until they crush you under their weight. And to have it happen again, and then again… we read Naomi's words, and we understand.

I don't blame Naomi at all for the words she says. She is utterly hopeless, and she turns to her daughters-in-law and tells them to go back. There is no hope for a future with me. Nothing good can come from you going with me. Just go. Leave me alone- I accept my own death, but you should not throw your lives away with me.

Orpah turns back, but Ruth, in this beautiful and elegant speech, refuses. That speech gets a lot of attention. I doubt many women would be willing to make such a speech to their mother-in-law. But notice something in verse 18: Ruth has made this speech, and Naomi realizes that she will not be rid of Ruth, and said no more to her.

Said no more to her. That must have been a long walk back to Bethlehem.

Again, I understand where Naomi's coming from: when something bad happens, I don't want to talk about it. I don't want you to talk to me about it. I want to be left alone. When you are in those long, dark nights of the soul, words can cease to mean anything. Words, even words said with the best of intentions, sometimes make things worse.

They made it back to Bethlehem, and Naomi is recognized by the other women, those that she had grown up with; there is good implication in this chapter that these women, when they recognized Naomi, welcomed her back. But look at what Naomi says: "… the Almighty has made me very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has returned me empty." (Verse 20-21)

How do you respond to someone like that? If Naomi came to my office, told me her story and said those words, I don't know what I would say.

You see, there's bad theology in what Naomi says. We understand and teach others that bad things do not come from the LORD. God is good, and badness is the absence of good; therefore it is impossible for bad things to come from God. That's one of the foundations of what we believe; it is one of the first lessons in theology class. Bad things happen because it is a fallen world; Naomi is blaming God when it isn't God's fault!

But theology only serves us to a point. You see, with theology we can talk about God, we can even talk to God, but theology cannot speak *for* God. We can speculate on the nature of God, but when someone in grief raises their voice in anguish and cries out to God, theology is the wrong answer to give.

No, I think Ruth and the other women offer the only answer that is right at this time: silent companionship. Ruth refused to leave Naomi's side, and I am willing to bet Naomi would not have made it back to Bethlehem without her. They get to Bethlehem and the women welcome back their sister, the one who had gone away so long ago and now returns with nothing. They do not offer her consolation, nor do they judge her. They do not offer her deep, sound reasons for why these bad things have happened to her. They don't offer trite, simplistic homilies from a greeting card to relieve her pain. They simply, quietly welcome her back, and without speaking a word let her know, *we're in this with you*.

Terrible things have happened because nobody stepped in to help. There have been far too many examples of crimes being committed, atrocities happening, that entire groups of people together could have stopped, but nobody did. There have been studies done that show that the more people in a group, the less likely anybody is to do anything to help someone in need. We assume someone else will help, and nobody does.

But the beautiful thing about the people of God, about the Church, is that when we are together, we are supposed to be at our best. When one member suffers, we all suffer. When one member cries, we all cry. When there is a need, we all come together and meet that need. And when there are no words that can be said, we simply sit and mourn together.

The one thing we cannot do, as the body of Christ, is let any member suffer alone. Though they might try to send us away, they might say things that are wrong, they might accuse God of doing awful things, still we surround that person, we go with them, we continue to love them. If that means we must join them in pain, we will join them in pain. If that means going down with them into the long, dark night of the soul, so be it.

As the people of God, it is our responsibility to look at our brother or our sister who is hurting and say, "Where you go, I go. Where you die, I will die. We are in it together."

But the even more beautiful thing, the reason behind why we support one another and suffer together, is because God is truly at work in the midst of our suffering. God does greater things than we can even imagine. There will come a day when God will wipe away the tears from our eyes, when our sorrows will turn to rejoicing, when our weeping will be turned to singing. Until that day comes, we continue in this together.

Jarrod S. Davis