**When Lamentation Is All Around: Choose Accompaniment**

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*But Ruth said, “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!”* Ruth 1:16-17

It has been a hard week for many of us. As we gather in this 1717 Meetinghouse, let us draw strength from the history of our people. Our people have gone through difficult times before. This gathered congregation has struggled and survived despite the best of times and the worst of times. For those of you who rejoice right now, we respect your joy. And for those of us who mourn and struggle, we draw comfort that millions of human beings throughout history have lived in difficult times and still made art, found joy and shared meals together. This is our time, and we can and will make it through.

One of the things I love about being in worship is that we can bring our whole selves here. If you need to weep, weep in the company of those who care about you as a human being and a church member. If you rejoice, rejoice. If you worry, may you know that you can share your burdens with one another so that the worry can be carried by more than you alone. This is the beautiful thing about coming together, we are in it as a community, not isolated, lonely souls without connection or love.

In today’s reading from the Book of Ruth, we enter a terrible time of famine and sadness. Hunger pushed Naomi and her husband Elimelech from Israel into the land of Moab. Upon arriving in Moab with Elimelech and her two sons, Naomi’s husband dies, leaving her a widow. First hunger and the loss of a homeland. Second, the death of her husband. And now, her two sons grow and marry Moabite women Orpah and Ruth. And then, Naomi’s sons also die leaving her a widow and without male relatives. Her daughters-in-law are widowed and the world she knew has crumbled all around her.

Food insecurity and famine, widowhood and the death of her children leaves Naomi bitter. Without a male to protect them, the three women are alone and hungry in Moab. And yet, Naomi longs for a better future for her two daughters-in-law. She knows that her lot may be bitter, and she wants Orpah and Ruth to have a better, a brighter future. Naomi kisses the two women and says, “Go back. Go home and live with your mothers. And may God treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. May God give each of you a new home and a new husband.” (Ruth 1:8-9)

They respond, “No, we’re going with your people.”

And Naomi replies firmly, “Go back, my dear daughters. Why would you come with me? Do you suppose I still have sons in my womb who can become your future husbands? Go back, dear daughters—on your way please! I’m too old to get a husband…. No, dear daughters: this is as bitter pill for me to swallow—more bitter for me than for you. God has dealt me a hard blow.” (Ruth 1: 11-13)

Orpah kisses her Naomi goodbye, but Ruth, whose name means “friend” chooses to stand by her side. Ruth famously says, “Don’t force me to leave you: don’t make me go home. Where you go, I will go; and where your people lodge, I will lodge. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I’ll die, and that is where I’ll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

I love this part of Ruth so much. It is especially important to me as it was part of the vows that my parents shared at their wedding. My mom had a song with this in it sung as the special music during the ceremony and with that commitment to join families, for one’s people to become the other’s people, and to follow each other for all their lives they joined together and traveled from California to Colorado. The two of them committed to this deep love.

At my dad’s funeral, leaving my mom a widow of only 51 years of age, she sat on floor in front of the church on the altar steps and played that same song with Ruth’s words of devotion and love that they shared at their wedding. The standing room only sanctuary was filled with folks who loved my dad, and we all wept. I can never read these lines in the Book of Ruth without hearing my mom’s broken voice filled with tears and love. She understood Naomi calling herself bitter at the loss of her husband.

Fifteen years later, when my mom passed on to life eternal, I helped take both my mom and dad home to be buried together at our cabin in the mountains. Their promises to follow one another, for their God to align and be buried beside each other was fulfilled.

Ruth did something extraordinary so long ago in the country of Moab. She chose love over familiarity, over her own country, culture, language and religion. She chose love and faithfulness to her mother-in-law, and they bound their lives together to set forth into the unknown. Ruth chose to see the struggles of Naomi as her struggles, and shared grief with her. No longer would Naomi be alone. She had the loyalty, love and commitment of a daughter-in-law who loved her and moved with her to a strange country of Israel and converted to a new religion of Judaism to be loyal to Naomi.

What can we learn from Ruth? How can she help us in our own time, especially if it is a time of bitterness and lamentation?

This is a story of **love**. Ruth chose to love Naomi more than her own self-interest. She aligns herself with Naomi and sets out to enter a strange new country accompanying Naomi with love.

This is a story about **support.** Ruth cares for Naomi when Naomi’s fate seems impossible. And Ruth has lost her own husband and is in the dangerous position of being widowed and childless as well. Together they support one another as they struggle to survive as single women in a patriarchal world.

This is a story about **loyalty.** Ruth sticks with Naomi even at her lowest.

This is a story about **service to others.** Ruth serves Naomi with love and loyalty. She chooses service to Naomi over prioritizing herself.

When we are going through hard times, when we suffer, when we mourn, when we grieve, we need folks with the loving hearts of Ruth to stand beside us.

I ask you to reach out to those around you who need a friend like Ruth and let them know of your need. If you can be a friend like Ruth to others, now is the time to step up and do it.

Love one another. Support one another. Be loyal to one another and serve one another. We are not meant to grieve and suffer alone. We are meant to walk beside one another out of famine times and into a land where the harvest will come and hope returns.

Let us pray for hope, even if we are not there yet. Naomi wasn’t. She was bitter. But her bitterness did not last a lifetime. Bitterness didn’t last always precisely because she had the love and loyalty and friendship of Ruth to accompany her out of darkness and into light. Amen.