



"Naomi and Ruth"

Sermon Series: "Witnesses to God's Larger Story"

Ruth 1:6-22

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(New International Version)

⁶ When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. ⁷ With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? ¹² Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons—¹³ would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has gone out against me!"

¹⁴ At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her."

¹⁶ But Ruth replied, "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. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." ¹⁸ When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

¹⁹ So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?"

²⁰ "Don't call me Naomi, ^[a] " she told them. "Call me Mara, ^[b] because the Almighty ^[c] has made my life very bitter. ²¹ I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted ^[d] me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."

²² So Naomi returned from Moab accompanied by Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter-in-law, arriving in Bethlehem as the barley harvest was beginning.

Footnotes:

- a. [Ruth 1:20](#) Naomi means *pleasant* ; also in verse 21.
- b. [Ruth 1:20](#) Mara means *bitter* .
- c. [Ruth 1:20](#) Hebrew *Shaddai* ; also in verse 21
- d. [Ruth 1:21](#) Or *has testified against*

This Naomi situation is occurring at this moment all around the world and maybe some of you are experiencing Naomi's situations in your own life. Did you hear it? *I started out full and now I'm empty.* The way I've been reading the culture of the world these days is that there is a lot of this going on – not only related to wealth, but also just general well being. People feel like things are being taken away from them and if you are not a Naomi now, maybe you might become one in the future. Friends, Naomi happens.

One of the things that we are going to look at today in this scripture is **a response to helping those who are experiencing Naomi moments in their life.** It requires something that I've been studying and reading about this summer – it requires empathy. **Empathy is an extraordinary aspect of the human being** and I've been reading a



new book entitled, “The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis” by Jeremy Rifkin. Now whenever a minister lifts up a book in the sanctuary you know he is liable to be attacked for holding it up, because I don’t know if this guy is a conservative or a liberal. I’m not endorsing everything he has ever written. I do want to encourage you to read the book because it is an extraordinary argument that he is making about the role of empathy in the development of our civilization and the way in which Christianity played a significant part in extending empathy into the culture – including in terms of the hospitals.

What he says is that essentially **human beings are wired for empathy**. It is an extraordinary look at this most beautiful gift that human beings have been given – the gift of empathy. Do you know that the word ‘empathy’ did not exist in the human vocabulary until 1909. Before that time, we had a different word that was used in this context. You probably can guess what it was. It wasn’t empathy, it was sympathy. But after 1909 and who know it came about in wider parlance, although they do know who invented the word – but we came up with all sorts of other words like: emphatic and empathizing.

It is interesting that the word empathy rose into our common language at the same time as we were discovering more about the unconscious in our psychology with the work of Sigmund Freud and later people like Carl Jung. So it was as if this word was just ripe for the plucking to help us understand ourselves better as we were beginning to understand and know more about ourselves psychologically and we even did have a psychology.

In our scripture lesson today what I’m going to talk about is the power of empathy. Jeremy Rifkin has a really neat definition of this word empathy and I think it is important to listen to in conversation with the scripture we’re about to study. Rifkin says that empathy is the **“willingness of an observer to become a part of another’s experience to share their feelings.”**

The willingness of a human being is like this – it is our yes, I want that new boat; yes, I want to date that person; yes, I want to go there on that vacation. It is our yes feeling to a certain meal or activity. We say yes, we will things, all the time. But this willingness is our yes-ness to the world. Sometimes when we experience depression we have no yes-ness – everything is simply no-ness, no, no, no. We can’t even say the word, we have no will power. It is same also in disciple. That our lack of disciple is the lack of focusing the will power. We say yes to everything and we can’t stop ourselves from saying yes to a drink, food or particular activity. That is our undisciplined willpower. This willingness is a capacity to say yes and it is a gift from God and we direct it then toward another person.

Listen, **“it is the willingness, the yes-ness of an observer”** – so in other words you are outside of situation, you are observing it to become a part of that person’s situation and experience. This is entering into. Sympathy is the awareness, “Oh, I’m so sorry that that has happened. I’m so sorry that you are suffering.” Empathy is, “I wish to understand what it is like to be you today when you just got the news that you’ve got cancer. What are your feeling.” That is the difference. The willingness, the yes-ness to enter into someone’s experience.

One of the challenges in our culture is that we don’t know if we should enter into someone’s experience. We might get sued or it might be a problem or it might become a burden to us and so this is a big deal for us. How do we enter into our people’s experience? What Rifkin is arguing is that human civilization has a capacity to do this and we’ve never even comprehended. However, the new brain studies that they are showing that we are hard wired to empathize with one another. We’ve always had the joke that women do this a lot better than man – well they’ve shown this neurologically, but all of us, the human brain apparently is emerging more and more with this capacity to empathize and thus Rifkin speculates what will our world be like if we could become more empathetic. I commend the argument of his book to you and I found it very interesting.



I'd like to study and connect this now with the story of Ruth that we just read and I invite you take the pew Bibles because I'm going to lift out three thoughts from the scripture and I do wish for you to engage with the text with me.

We will be looking at Ruth, Chapter 1. Ruth comes fairly early in the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and then Ruth. The Book of Ruth is one of the most beautiful storylines of the Old Testament, maybe of the whole Bible. I love this storyline and I wish I could study more in depth with you, but we can just look at a few things this morning in light of this invitation for WHPC to learn how to be an empathetic congregation. You know we have this vision statement – we seek nurturer relationships with one another. Well, how do we do that? We need a disciple or a system to do that and we are going to move toward talking about what that system might be.

I'm going to pull out three things here in this story **and the first thing is that this is a desperate situation.** We are dealing here with a situation of desperate need. This is a story that begins with famine, continues with dislocation of a family – they are essentially refugees, they moved to a different region or country and then ends with death – this story of Naomi's situation is a very difficult situation. **What happens today, happened then, what happened then, happens today.** We all have experienced loss of loved ones and people are dying that we love, there are people in this room who have lost loved ones. Probably not many of us have been refugees ever, but there is always the risk of being dislocated or losing your home, whether it is a flood or a tornado. So, we recognize this and see the floods in Pakistan for example. You know we can watch the television and just sort of have sympathy or we can watch and have empathy and say, "Oh, my gosh, what would it be like to be them today, to have no food or water and to have children dying of disease." You know we want to go there too in depth, because it overwhelms us, we are a world away and we don't know what to do. Next week, Peter Barnes is going to suggest something to do that we can do as a congregation in terms of responding because it has been on his heart.

You know all around us the situation is occurring – **Naomi's story is alive and well in our world – death of loved ones, death of spouses, children, dislocation and then of course, the lack of food and famine.** Notice that Naomi's situation is so challenging to her that later in the story she sums up her life experience by wanting to change her name. You know people change their names when they've had dramatic life experiences or this just want to go away with the past and start something new. Well in this case she can't believe that the situation has emerged in her life that she never expected that this would happen – there was famine, she moved with her husband and sons to a local country called Moab. However, in Israel they were in a famine, so they go and find better pasture so that they can have food and there she loses her husband unexpectedly. She is a new land and she loses her husband and they her two sons marry Moabite women and then unexpectedly we don't know how they die. After experiencing all this difficulty she says, "Don't call me Naomi anymore." She says in Verse 20, "Call me Mara." Mara means bitter. It is like the gall, the taste that comes up - sorry to be graphic, after you've vomited – that sense of ugh, that bitterness, you can almost taste it in your mouth, that kind of situation, that's happened to me call me that, that is what my life is.

However, **she made a fundamental mistake of identifying with her life situation. God is about to do a new thing in her life,** in transforming her and showing her the abundance grace and faithfulness that can help someone get separation from their situation and know that they are more than their life situation or what is occurring. But at this point she is so identified, she is pressed into her situation like red wine spilled on a white tablecloth. She thinks there is no way she could be anywhere different or how it could be different or how she could get out of this – Mara, call me bitter.



This is her difficult situation. This is how this story begins. By analogy, we can then make the comparison to our own lives and the connection that Naomi is happening. It hasn't happened to you yet, it will. Naomi is a part of the human condition and how we respond to other people as Naomi occurs to them is one of the great challenges of the Christian church.

Here we move to the second point which is Naomi's reluctance. She has been given two amazing gifts, although her sons have died and although her husband died, while in the Moab land, her two wonderful sons married two Moabites. She now has these two wonderful daughter-in-laws and Naomi decides after the loss of her husband and sons to go back to the Promised Land, because she has heard that things have turned around a little bit back home. In fact, she is from Bethlehem. She says to her two beautiful daughter-in-laws, "Look, this is my situation, it is not your situation." This is her reluctance and this is kind of like our white, middle class attitude to things – if I can be so blunt – that we are reluctant to actually to tell anyone that we are having a tough time and much less tell anyone how they can help us. We'd rather just sort of suffer silently until the last moment and then maybe reluctantly to accept help. It is very hard for us to admit that we need help. We'd rather just go on our own.

Notice what she says in Verse 8:

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Basically saying you don't want to be around me, go back, this isn't your situation it is my situation and I can handle it on my own.

Look again at Verse 10:

Then she kissed them and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."
¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters...."

You see her resistance here. She didn't want to bring in these two innocent, beautiful daughter-in-laws into her situation. That is our initial impulse oftentimes when we have Naomi like situations – when we are sick, suffering or when we are going through a difficult time. We don't always let people know. We are embarrassed. We want to put up a good front. We are not authentic with the reality of our own suffering. I don't know why that is, but it seems to be a bit of an epidemic in our culture. I think we need to get beyond that. You know one of the reasons why we need to get beyond that is because the church was designed to be the pumping heart of blood to the extremities of the body of Christ. But, when you don't let the church know it is kind of like a blood clot blocking the free flow of blood to the outer extremities. **The only way the church can do what it was designed to do is if it knows what we are really experiencing in life.** If we cocoon and hold ourselves tightly and never show our true vulnerable situations – we can't care, the church can't become the love that Christ envisioned for it.

This is one of the hard invitations of being a Christian. We think that sometimes that Christianity is about living a more effective lifestyle or a more victorious lifestyle or how you can order your life in a certain way and God will bless you. But really one of the easy things about being a Christian is just admitting that you need help, when you need help. It is kind of like the Prayer of Confession – it is really important to confess our sins, but we do it together so no one is pointed out. But one of the things that we need to do is to have the courage to share what we are really experiencing in life. We can't be a sanitized community, we need to be a baptized community – we



are all cleansed by the water of Christ, not by our perfect middle class life of success. Vulnerability is the invitation and the first step to a community becoming empathetic and I know all of you desire this. We all wish to speak with open hearts; it is just that we don't always have the courage to do so. This is the invitation to follow Jesus and to recognize that we are not so special and that every single one of us needs help from time-to-time.

Noami's reluctance sort of helps us see how can we be more courageous to share our needs and when we are not courageous and we even are reluctant – guess what happens, God's grace even trumps that. God's grace trumps our reluctance and look at what happens here. **This is the third thing I want to show you – there is a graceful, unexpected response from one of her daughters-in-law.** One of her daughters-in-law does not need to do this, but it is total grace, total love and this is the response in Verse 14:

¹⁴ At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-by, but Ruth clung to her.

Here is the mystery of God's sense of calling on each of us. For whatever reason, Ruth had that sense of calling from God that touched her heart, to open her heart to love and commitment to Naomi. We don't understand why Ruth did it and Orpha didn't. Orpha simple kissed her mother-in-law goodbye and went back to home land, but Ruth felt that strong inner call to stay. This is the mystery here – that some of us are called to emphasize for different situations. You might be called to help another person and I'm not. I might be called to help someone whom you are not. This is the mystery of God's graceful economy – wherever there is a need I am convinced that God can meet it when we are listening.

Here we see this graceful response of Ruth and she responds with this most poetic and beautiful response, almost analogous to the work of Jesus Christ who said, "I'll never leave you or forsake you." Or the presence of the Holy Spirit who is with us always and will lead us and teach us and go with us. Listen to what Ruth says: "Where you go I will go" and I will not leave you. Beautiful phrase there and we use it sometimes in weddings. Verse 16:

But Ruth replied, "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.

What a beautiful response of empathy, of entering into Naomi's situation. A situation that Ruth was free to leave, but she chose to stay. Notice here in Verse 18:

¹⁸ *When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.*

Naomi's response is the moment where we surrender to the grace that God is offering – where we feel we don't deserve it, we may resist it a little bit, we are little embarrassed, but there comes that moment when we need the help and here it is in Verse 18.

¹⁸ *When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.*

When people feel our determined empathy, they are going to open up to us. When people recognize that we are not just talking and simply being inauthentic by saying, "How are you?" "Good." "Fine, see you later. Hope all is well." When people feel our determined willing, yes: "I want to help you. What is it that I can do for you? Do you need any food tonight? I know you've just gotten out of the hospital." They feel our determined yes-ness.



Now, I've always found this kind of interesting. I know some of you we've gone out to lunch or dinner together. This happens to me and I suspect it happens to you and you get to the moment where you end up paying for the bill you say, "No, let me pay for it." No, let me." There is this moment of who is more determined. Sometimes you're wondering, I hope he is (audience laughter). But that is the sense of somebody is going to end up paying for this and whoever is more determined will.

Well, we can be determined in our expression of care. When people hear that in a voice, see that in a facial gestures, they surrender, they receive most of the time. When they feel that it just a imposition, "Oh, really?" When they hear that in our voice, when they don't see the love in our face, then no one is going to open up and receive. So this is really an invitation to look at ourselves and our behavior. How is that we are expressing this determined desire to care for one another?

Friends, now I'm going to shift into a little bit of a family business mode and so if you are visitor or a guest, I just want you to watch and listen. This invitation is not for you. This is for our church members, because how we become an empathetic community of Christ is very important and if we don't have a structure or a discipline to do it, we just simply wander and there is no organization to providing the care that is necessary. One of the neat things that has been emerging is the **new iCare Net ministry**, which is our primary and new way of providing care for this church. I'd like to share a little bit with you about the iCare. Last month we introduced iCare and this month I just want to reiterate a few things.



This ministry is going to rise or fall on our willingness - that is every single one of you sitting here today and others who are not, the willingness of each person in this community to say yes or to say no. To sense God's calling to help. I wish for this community to be known around the world and in our denomination to be an extraordinarily caring community and that we have a mechanism for doing so – for the Glory of God. I think this iCare Net which was developed over the last several months by a group of people can help us in this. I'd like to share a little bit about it.

Last month we invited you to discern if God was calling you to become iCare volunteers. About 350 of you signed the little card. That is awesome! **We need you to follow through and get the training** because we want everyone to be on the same page in how this is going to work. We could use more iCare volunteers, because the more the better and the more people to respond. Maybe one care, maybe 10 or 15 people will respond and the more people we have it is that ratio difference. It is important to have big pool to draw from, especially when there are multiple concerns.

We are inviting you to consider being an iCare volunteers. Some of you hear listening will sense God is calling you to be an **iCare Coordinators**. Coordinators are about 12-14 of these folks that have a **specific gift for administration, management and care**. They will be assigned to one situation until it ends. That iCare Coordinator is a very important role. But **many of us can be iCare volunteers** and I'd like to just share with you how this iCare ministry works. The first step is that all iCare volunteers are going to receive an iCare opportunity email. This is going to come primarily through email. If you are not on email and you want to be an iCare volunteer we will make sure that you get that information. This email is going to come from iCare Coordinators.

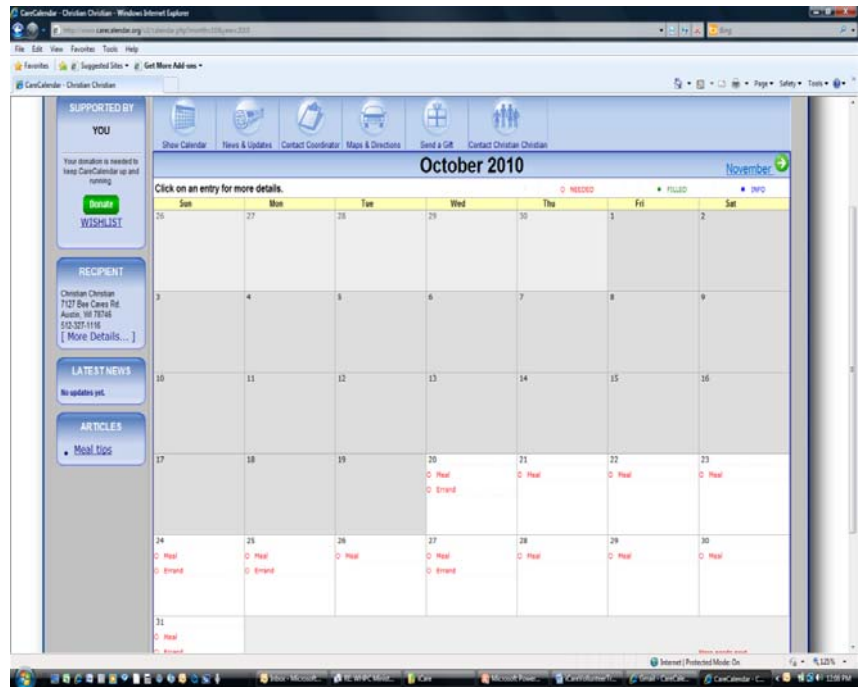




Once this email opportunity comes, you are going to respond using this most **amazing new tool called the iCare Calendar**. We can go to that slide now and see that the iCare calendar looks like this, this is their webpage (www.carecalendar.org) and on the right hand box of the home page there are two little log ins and you are going to be given that log in information as an iCare volunteer. **What is going to pop up then is this care calendar.**

Let's say for example Jim & Edith Johnson, and he didn't know I was going to do this – Jim is one of these miracle guys who is battling cancer and this cancer seems to

gone. But when he was first diagnosed, Jim and Edith needed a little help with some food. So the iCare Coordinator will call Jim and say, "What nights would you need food?" The iCare Coordinator then will program this calendar and there will be hot links. Let's say he needed food on the first three days of October – so there would be hot links on those first three days – dinner, dinner, dinner and you would then say, "Oh, well I could provide a dinner or meal for Edith & Jim, I'd love to do that and the volunteer would click on there and fill it out and that would be it. Now, Jim & Edith know a lot of people in the church, not only are they going to probably get a lot of response from the iCare system, but also people that simply love them.



Well about the person, and this is where it requires empathy, who is brand new and doesn't know anyone. Who

Step 1:
Receive an iCare opportunity.

is going to care for them? Who is going to care for the person who hasn't shown up in church for three

years? That is where the iCare volunteers are going to say yes to help this person I don't know, but I know they need help and I'm going sign up. It is very simple and seamless.



• **Step 2: Respond as you are led by signing up using the Care Calendar.**

Then the next step after signing up is actually to go and do it. It is one thing to

say, “Yes, I signed up to take dinner to Jim, but here it is 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday night and the kids are screaming and I don’t really want to go driving out it is 110 degrees.” This sort of thing – you know where I’m going with this. Responding to the commitment is a big part of the effectiveness of this.

Step 3: Provide care. Become tangible love with a joyful spirit in the name of Christ.

Here is my mandate. It is really simple. The Christian life is really, really simple.

We wonder a lot what should the denomination do, what should the churches do. It is really simple – become love. Spend the rest of your life becoming love. It is a profound invitation. It is so simple. So, this is how it can happen, become love and give yourself away through a meal or offering to drive someone and the more of us who know about these situations, the more we will be able to say, yes, I feel called to journey with you and others won’t.

So after you’ve then provided the care, the final step is that if you happen to learn something when you are visiting, say, Jim

Step 4: Inform iCare Coordinator of any pertinent information you might learn during your delivery of care.

& Edit say, “We’re all good, we have too many meals.” Well you’d want to get that information back to the iCare Coordinators. Very simple feedback loop. This is the simple beauty of the iCare Ministry Net and I pray that God uses it and blesses it and makes abundant fruit in our congregation and that each one of us have the opportunity to be empathetic to the cares and situations that rise up in our congregation and then some of you will even be blessed to receive it, the meal, the phone call or the drive. This system keeps us accountable to our vision of seeking to nurture relationships with one another.

I thank you for your patience with my passion and I just want to lift up to your eyes the image in the Book of Ruth that the story begins with famine. The last verse of Chapter 1 hints at the goodness that is to come and it goes like this: “...and the barley harvest was beginning in Israel.” The season of abundance was about to be given back to Naomi and Naomi’s daughter-in-law Ruth ends up marrying a man name Boaz. He was a tall, strapping man and they have a child. The child of Ruth and Boaz is name Obed, the grandfather of the great King David and Ruth becomes in the sweep of history the great, great, great grandmother of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Tell me who could have imagined one little act of empathy creating what a gift of grace.



Friends we cannot imagine what comes of the love we share with one another. If this congregation, each one of us, stop worrying about the church and starts becoming love, continues to become love. That is really the good stuff. The church will take care of itself. The denomination will take care of itself. The world will take care of itself. But we can become love. I pray that iCare is a very simple to take first and second step to that end.

Let us pray.

Loving God I ask that by the power of Your Spirit You would inspire each one of us to care more completely to the praise of Your name and to the goodness of this community, through Christ our Lord, I pray. Amen.

