

When the World Falls Apart (Ruth#1)

June 19, 2016

Ruth 1

The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights

Pastor Dave Carver

If I heard it once, I heard it a dozen times last week: “Read me a story, Grampy.” And I did. You know I did.

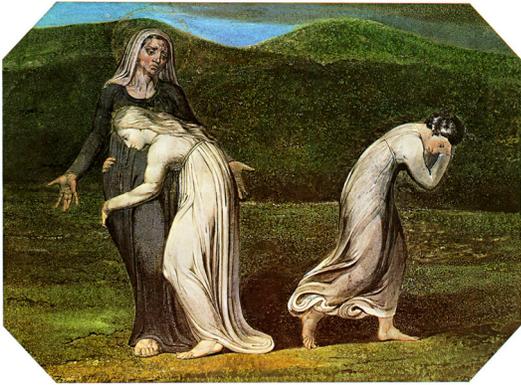
Because we all love stories, don’t we? We like to hear them, read them, watch them, tell them... We use stories to entertain, instruct, inspire... we use stories to allow us to enter into a different reality – one that, if we’re lucky, allows us to understand our own a little better.

So this summer, we’re going to dive into one of my favorite stories of all time, a classic “once-upon-a-time” love story from the Old Testament that begins in tragedy and ends with “happily ever after”. It is, as you have heard, the story of Elimilech’s family – and more particularly, some of the women in that family.

Here’s a spoiler alert: if the story was really about Elimilech, it wouldn’t be in the Bible. If it was really about Naomi, or Ruth, or Boaz, it wouldn’t be in the Bible. Mostly, it’s in the Bible because of the ways that it points to the family that became King David’s family, and as you know, King David was a pretty big deal in the Bible.

More than that, though, it’s a story about the family that became Jesus’ family – also a pretty big deal in the Bible.

But as much as I'd like to tell you this story because it's about Elimilech, or Naomi, or Ruth, or David, or Jesus... I think



that the main reason we need to hear it today is because it's about us. For the next five weeks, we'll be listening to this old story and, I hope, being entertained, instructed, inspired, and challenged as we try to live lives of faith in 2016.

¹The story begins with some amazingly horrible events. There is a famine in the land of the Promise, the land of Israel – and so Elimilech and his family become refugees in the land of Moab. Once there, however, things go from bad to worse, because only three verses into the story, Elimilech dies. It only takes two more verses for his only children, Mahlon and Chilion, to succumb, and now Elimilech's widow is left with two foreign daughters-in-law in a foreign land. The first five verses of our story are about death, decay, and devastation.

Sounds like page one of this morning's newspaper, doesn't it? Shootings in Orlando, or Wilkinsburg, or Crafton Heights. Refugees streaming across borders in Turkey or Greece or Ethiopia or Germany or Honduras or... Families, many of which we know and love, who have been displaced by untimely death, or job loss, or the arrest of someone in the family, or unsavory landlords...

We don't know what it's like to move from ancient Israel into ancient Moab, but we know something about pain and loss and times when it seems like the world is simply falling to pieces, don't we?

And when that happens, well, it can be easy to think that we are alone in the world. Nobody has felt pain like our pain.

¹ "Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab", William Blake (1795)

Nobody knows the difficulties we've been through. We are alone in our struggle against the universe, or God, or fate. And so in our reading from this morning, Naomi responds to the famine in her native land and the deaths of her husband and sons by sending away her daughters-in-law. "Don't waste your time with me," she says, "I'm a broken down wretch of a creature." She tries to bless these women as she sends them back to their homes, but her heart isn't really in it. Eventually, Orpah is able to leave her mother-in-law, but Ruth won't hear of it. Four times, the old widow looks Ruth in the eye and says, "You don't get it, do you? I'm alone. Beat it. Go home." Because that's what pain does, doesn't it: it isolates you.

In his "Ted Talk" on depression, Andrew Solomon says,

Everything there was to do seemed like too much work. I would come home and I would see the red light flashing on my answering machine, and instead of being thrilled to hear from my friends, I would think, "What a lot of people that is to have to call back." Or I would decide I should have lunch, and then I would think, but I'd have to get the food out and put it on a plate and cut it up and chew it and swallow it, and it felt to me like the Stations of the Cross.²



³That's what grief and pain and loss do to us, isn't it? They make it seem impossible to grasp any kind of future. I've seen that in refugee camps in South Sudan. I heard it when my friend Kucho Shaine said, "the government of Sudan is bombing our villages in the Nuba mountains every week, and the world does not notice. Nobody cares. We are alone." I have heard that in the plaintive cries of the lost and lonely and grief stricken here in our own community: "Go on home, Dave. You can't do anything anyway. Nobody can."

² "Depression: The Secret We Share", transcript found at https://www.ted.com/talks/andrew_solomon_depression_the_secret_we_share/transcript?language=en

³ "Naomi and Her Daughters-In-Law", Marc Chagall, 1960

There are times, when like Naomi, we become convinced that not only is the world against us, but the Lord is too. “The hand of the Lord has turned against me”, she weeps. When the world is falling apart, it’s easy to think that you’re alone.

So our story tells us, so far, that horrible things happen and that when they do, we feel like we are alone. Another lesson from this chapter is that people who are in pain can be, well, unpleasant. Sometimes, people in pain act like real jerks. For instance, after Naomi is unsuccessful at getting her daughter-in-law to go back to her family, she returns to Bethlehem (accompanied by Ruth). Did you hear what she said when she got there? “My name isn’t ‘Naomi’ (meaning ‘pleasant’) anymore. Call me ‘Mara’ (which means ‘bitter’) from now on. When I left, I was full, but now I am empty and alone.”

Now when she says this, who’s there? The folks in Bethlehem, of course, but also Ruth. Here’s Naomi going on and on about how nobody loves her and all this horrible stuff has happened and she’s all alone in the world, and Ruth is standing there, helping to hold the old lady up, waiting to be introduced. The more that Naomi complains about being alone and bereft, the more Ruth has to be thinking, “Seriously? What am I, chopped liver? You know I can hear you, right Naomi?”

Remember Ruth had just made this amazingly beautiful speech about love and support and faithfulness – so beautiful, in fact, that some of you wanted to read it in your wedding services – and now Naomi is pretending that Ruth doesn’t even exist. What is up with that?

People in pain lash out – and often that winds up hurting those who choose to come close. I’ve seen that happen in a hundred ways: someone comes in to the church looking for a little help, and we go to the food pantry to pull a few things together. I come into the room where the person is waiting and explain that I’ve got some spaghetti and beans and peanut butter and whatnot

and the person looks into the bag and says, “Strawberry jam? Seriously? I *hate* strawberry. Is this the best you’ve got?”

My first reaction is get defensive, and to proclaim, “Listen, Bub, you better check that attitude at the door because I’m only trying to help here... you’ve got no right to be angry with me.” And I realize, this person isn’t really angry with me. This person is ashamed at having to come to our food pantry, or devastated at the loss of a job, or otherwise incapacitated by the pain they’ve suffered, and I happen to be standing here at the time. That’s what happens when the world falls apart – we become people that we don’t want to be, at times.

So what do we *do*? We get it, Dave – the world is a hard place for lots of people on lots of days. What are we supposed to do about that?

The first and most important thing that we can do is to, pardon my language, give a damn. In a media cycle full of alligator attacks and celebrity divorces and gossip scandals and basketball finals... it’s easy to think of 49 people gunned down in Orlando as so “last week”, or to think that the nearly sixty million forcibly displaced people across the globe are someone else’s neighbor, not mine. You don’t like the news that’s in front of you? Change the channel. Turn the page. Play some Candy Crush or Trivia Crack. Who needs that negativity in your life, anyway?

I’m not asking you to care because it’s easy, or because it makes sense in your life right now. I’m asking you to give a rat’s ass about these kinds of things because I think that’s what the Gospel compels us to do. And if you are able to muster some discipline to care, at least a little bit, about the people whose lives are falling apart, then the next step is to look for a way to enter into some part of their story with them.

For the people who are close at hand, that’s a little easier. Our Cross Trainers Staff, for instance, will have the opportunity to brush up against some young people this summer whose worlds

have been or are being turned upside down in all kinds of ways. You all will spend time with children who have been abused or neglected; you will engage with young people whom God loves dearly who carry incredible scars that might well be invisible. If someone opens up to you about some incredible pain, know that in all probability, you won't be able to fix it. Fortunately, it's not your job to fix it. It's your job – it's everyone's job – to listen for it. To respect it. To enter into it. And then, perhaps in conversation with Brad or Jason or me or someone else, to help that child get to a place where she or he is able to envision a different reality for her or himself. The young people we're hiring have the easiest way to respond to the message this morning.



And if you're not on Cross Trainers staff? Figure out a way to care. I don't care if you are a gun owner or a pacifist, can we agree that it's horrible when 50 young people are cut down while dancing in Florida? Can we agree that it's not God's intention for school children or office workers or worshippers to be mowed down by the blazing barrel of an assault weapon? Assuming we can agree on that, can we talk about creating some strategies for reducing the likelihood of that happening? This is a great week for that kind of discussion in all kinds of ways. There will be some discussion of action on a national level about legislation, and you might want to reach out to our senators or representatives. Offer your ideas as to what we can do to reduce the number of funerals at which we wring our hands and say "never again".

But here's the deal on that, from me, this week. If you are a Christian, you are not permitted to make this conversation about what you need to do to protect your rights and keep your options open. Frankly, as a follower of Jesus, you've already settled that: you've confessed that your rights are not the most important rights in the world – that you are here to serve others. I'm not saying you don't have rights or shouldn't value them – but that's

not the reason for this conversation. The reason for the conversation is to look for ways to staunch the flow of innocent blood. Talk about the people who will never experience another “right”, about the parents or spouses or children who sit across the breakfast table from an empty seat this morning. Obviously, any solution to gun violence will have to account for individual rights, yours included – but how about if we don’t *start* there? How about if we *start* by throwing around some ideas geared towards preventing gun violence?



And maybe, for some reason, you just can’t get your head wrapped around how to slow gun violence in our community or our world. Here’s another option. Did you know that June 20 is World Refugee Day? Every minute of every day, an average of 8 people are forced to flee their homes in search of somewhere safer. On average, refugees spend seventeen years – *seventeen stinking years!* – waiting for whatever is going to come next: a return to their home, a resettlement somewhere else; seventeen years of uncertainty and vulnerability. Those people drowning in the Aegean Sea, or walking across borders in Hungary, or riding the trains north through Central America... they are children of God. They are our neighbors. We are called to do what we can do to make our world a better and safer place for everyone, not just us.

And again, please don’t come crowing to me about how we can’t really help these refugees because all they want to do is come here and take our stuff. As a follower of Jesus Christ, you’ve already said that what’s yours isn’t the most important thing, but rather, living in the footsteps of Jesus is what you want to be about. Your stuff, my stuff – it’s important (hey, I have a fence to keep the deer out of my garden) – but it’s far from *the* most important thing, and it’s not where we’re beginning this conversation.

I've made a handout containing a number of websites for you to check out on your own time this week. Some are related to gun violence, while others have to do with refugees. Please understand, the only action that I am actively endorsing is that you take the time to *care* about this stuff. I'm not saying we are going to agree on strategies – but I am saying that Elimilech's story, and Naomi's story, and Ruth's and David's and Jesus' story – that *our story* – ought to drive us to the place where we care about what happens; and that place of care can lead us to a means by which to get involved.

This is *our* story. We are created as people in and for community. Can we choose to care, and to act together as we stand against violence and hatred and death? Thanks be to God, who calls us from death to life through Jesus his Son, Amen.