

Her name meant “pleasant” or “sweet,” but she changed it to “bitter.” *“Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty...”* So Naomi declared to those who had known her before famine forced her family to move east to the country of Moab. One could read the book of Ruth as the story of how Naomi got her name back, for in the end, the birth of Obed seems to have melted away Naomi’s bitterness.

I have to admit I sometimes find it hard to be with bitter people. As with Naomi, I may understand the reason for the bitterness, but inside, I think it should have a time limit. About someone who seems bitter, perhaps you too have remarked, “He’s still carrying that around?”; or said, “She can’t seem to let that go.” Bitterness can wear us down.

Still, even in her emptiness and bitterness, one of the amazing aspects of the Ruth story is how Naomi continued to care for her daughters-in-law. Naomi called upon a strength of care and compassion for Orpah and Ruth, who had also lost husbands. And while she could have been jealous of their youth, she was committed to enabling them to begin again.

In biblical times, a woman’s wholeness was dependent on a man. Before you pick up stones to throw, that was not a suggestion to reinstate that cultural reality, or even maintain the vestiges that remain. Yet, it was the loss of husbands that created the crisis in Ruth, and it is with new husbands Naomi sees security being found for her daughters-in-law.

As much as she loves them, Naomi believes Orpah and Ruth are going to have a better shot at a new life in their native Moab, not as foreigners in Naomi’s Judah. I even hear a touch of humor from Naomi when she asks, “Even if I did find a husband today, and become pregnant tonight – presumably with twin sons – would you two wait around until they were men?” At first, both refuse to stay in Moab, but then Orpah turns back, while Ruth continues with Naomi. Yet, as we heard, there is so much more. Ruth does more than escort Naomi. She says she wants to make Naomi’s people her people, and Naomi’s God her God, and to stay with her until death. Ruth’s words have been put into songs, often sung at weddings – “your people shall be my people.”

Even though the role of men in redeeming widows is clearly noted, the Ruth story is truly shaped by the actions of the women. As I read in one comment about the painting on the bulletin cover, while Ruth provides a protective cover for Naomi, and securely places her arm around her mother-in-law’s shoulder, it is Naomi’s staff that is pointing the way forward as they share a mutuality of care and commitment.

Once in Bethlehem, Ruth takes on the back-bending work of gleaning, hard labor to pick single grains off the ground. Boaz takes notice, makes the connection between his relative Naomi and Ruth, and in his own way sees Ruth will be safe in his fields.

Then, there is the part of the story where it seems to move from a G-rating to PG-13. One senses Naomi's eyes light up when she tells Ruth of her "plan for the man!" "Ruth, go take a bath and put on your finest clothes, for tonight is the barley festival at Boaz' place!" Yes, one could read this plan as that of a scheming, cagey widow, but it turns out to be less intended to trick Boaz, as for Naomi, with Ruth, to reveal to him what is possible. Boaz takes the bait, and then works his own scheme to enable Naomi's plan to become real. "You want the land of Elimilech? Okay, but you also have to marry Ruth."

The story could end with the birth of Obed, who will be the grandfather of the great King David, who we should note has an immigrant, foreign grandmother. Yet, the delight of the story is it comes full circle when the child is given to Naomi to nurse. As she witnessed her desires for Ruth fulfilled, her own wholeness is restored. The women of Bethlehem city, to whom Naomi had proclaimed her bitterness, now declare, "Naomi has a son," and one senses she has taken back her name, "pleasant."

We find intrigue and scheming within the Ruth story, yet what shines through for me is the sense of selflessness with which each character acts. God has no direct interventions in the Book of Ruth, but the divine nature of "hesed" – loyalty, faithfulness – is revealed within this community of characters. The story tells of an intimate, interweaving of gratitude: Naomi for Ruth, and Ruth for Naomi, Boaz for Ruth, and Naomi for Boaz. One does not sense their good deeds are a result of either necessity or obligation, but emerge from deep feelings of gratitude one for another.

Their care for each other can cause us to look at our own actions in life, and particularly our response to God's love. We too are called to respond out of nurtured gratitude, not forced obligation.

Now, admittedly, it is stewardship season in the church, and I know there is a risk in not pushing the obligatory responsibility to pledge during stewardship season, but I also know one can sense when people are giving out of obligation, not out of gratitude, which rarely leads to generosity.

The church itself has a call to generosity, and last week, we read the story of another widow, who made the offering of a mite, a penny, two copper coins, that would not have made a dent in the temple's utility bill. Again, Jesus noticed the widow and her offering, but did not put her on a pedestal; instead he commended her generous and abundant spirit, while also calling out the temple officials who accepted her money but paid her no attention. This is not only a warning to the first century scribe and temple, but twenty-first century clergy and church. For us, it means when a church begins to compromise its generosity for its own survival, Jesus issue us a warning that we have chosen maintaining an institution over sustaining a widow.

That said, we do approach our stewardship in the church from two aspects. First, we know the church has a budget, and needs, and pledges help fulfill those needs. Yet, second, we also know our stewardship is to be based on more than bottom line needs. It is to be sourced in, and incited by gratitude and expressed in generosity.

I could say all sorts of things about generosity, in terms of how much to give. As I shared last Sunday, Lynn and I have tithed for the entirety of our marriage. The 10% discipline is one we chose and have maintained. I commend working toward a tithe as the baseline for giving, not because it is a mandate of the Bible, but because it enables the freedom to be generous and not begrudge one's giving.

Generosity, at its heart, is a response, incited by gratitude. Generosity is not a dollar amount, though we all have our understanding of what makes a generous gift for a particular cause or effort, and for our annual commitment to the church.

Over my years of ministry, stewardship seasons have come and gone, but a few witnesses stay in my mind. I remember and often use the words of a member of the first congregation I served in Dayton, Ohio. Without having lost his strong southern accent, George Yingling would offer the following wisdom at stewardship time: “I don’t say give until it hurts – I say, give until it is a joy!”

Joy and generosity in our giving are nurtured and incited by gratitude. This is exhibited by Naomi and Ruth and Boaz, who show an interplay of care that emerged from deep-felt devotion, not legal obligation. One senses a growing sense of gratefulness, that translates into acts of care and compassion for the other.

It is sometimes helpful to add grace, a third “g” word, as preceding gratitude and generosity. In our faith life, we speak of God’s mysterious grace in terms of our lives, our faith, our forgiveness, our abilities to begin anew each day. It is even by grace we are called to serve Jesus Christ, and exhibit his love and peace in our daily living at home, work, and school.

At times, it is good to also remind ourselves as a church to remember Christ’s grace, which instills gratitude, which in turn leads to generosity. We make our pledges and giving as a response of gratitude for the fellowship, care and nurture we have found within this family of believers. It is with gratitude we support our ministries with children and youth, even if we have no children or youth involved.

We also seek to be a people whose generosity extends into the community, even risking being like Ruth who crossed a foreign boundary and entered an unfamiliar place. We can do so because we are strengthened by our call to follow Christ to places of others’ need, beyond the shelters of our own comfort.

Finally, our mission takes place not only by going out these doors in mission, but by keeping our doors open to the Naomi’s and Ruth’s who may enter. And out of grace and gratitude, we are enabled to respond with a generous spirit, even to those who may be deeply bitter for longer than we think they should. In this way, we become Christ’s stewards of hope and encouragement to any Naomi who enters with bitterness, trusting in God’s time and way, she or he will reclaim the name of pleasant – and together, we will give thanks with grateful hearts.