

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

Dr. George O. Wood

It is not easy for me at least to select a text for Mother's day because I recognize immediately that when I speak to women in the congregation I may exclude men. That within the body of women in the church there are mothers and non-mothers. And that among mothers there are growing children and there are grown children. That there are mothers with husbands and mothers without husbands. That there are mothers with a positive relationship to their children and mothers that have problem relationships with their children. Mother's day is great for some and it can be a horrible experience for others. It's sort of like Christmas.

For many people it is a great and happy day. For others who have perhaps have had some cruel experiences in life it is the day which can bring a lot of memories to the surface that have been stored underground.

I want to avoid two things therefore this morning. One is to approach Mothers' Day from the standpoint of poetic idealism and as the minister of the morning say a lot of flowery words that don't seem to really fit into life but are nice ethereal things that from time to time poets say. I want to avoid that kind of approach. I want to avoid also the approach that preachers want to take on a special occasion. Using a club to remind everybody of the responsibilities they're neglecting. So mothers, don't worry today. I'm not going to try to in any way take this opportunity to say you're not doing a good job, here's how you could do better. You'll have to evaluate that before the Lord and not leave that up to me.

I want to talk to you today about a woman who has application for us all. Men and women, mothers and non-mothers. A woman whom I would call the Bittersweet Mother. Who's experience in love and with God has universal application for every one of us.

Her story is found for us in the book of Ruth. The seventh book of the Bible. Page 280 in the pew Bible if you'd like to turn there. If you would like to keep the Bible open throughout the sermon that will help you because I will not be reading extensive passages of scripture but rather referring to some key verses within the book of Ruth. Looking at them with you together.

I'll simply read the first two verses to begin. "In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land and a man from Bethlehem in Judah together with his wife and two sons went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech. His wife's name, Naomi. The names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephraimites from Bethlehem Judah. They went to Moab and lived there."

Let's take a moment to trace the setting of this scripture in order to appreciate its message. These two verses at the beginning of the seventh book of the Bible set before us some contrasts.

The first contrast that I see is the contrast between the turbulence of the times and the story of an ordinary life. We are told that this story occurred in the days of the judges. The days of the judges was an extended period of over four hundred years in Israel's history. It is a story that is as long as the time when the founding or discovery of America until now, a long period. A period that was rent by political difficulty, economic difficulty and hardship, social struggle and spiritual drought. It was a day when the state or the government was continually threatened from

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

within and without. It was weak. It was vulnerable to strangers and foreigners, held hostage to outside interests. It was a time of moral relativity, of moral degradation that is likened unto the age in which we live.

The characteristic, the chief characteristic of those four hundred and thirty years is found in the verse that immediately precedes the opening of the book of Ruth. The last verse in the book of Judges where it says, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes." Or everyone did as he saw fit. An anarchist kind of society. Can God be doing anything in the midst of such incredible turmoil? Can God be at work in our world today in the kind of turmoil our world and our country and our southern California area is in? Yes he can. This little book tells us that in the turbulence of today ordinary life is going on. Ordinary people are living and God is aware of ordinary people and ordinary families and ordinary problems albeit to us at times they appear somewhat extraordinary. But he is aware and keenly involved in ordinary life.

When I was a freshman in college my dreams reached for the stars. And beyond the stars. I had two directions before me in life at that particular point. One side of me wanted to go into the ministry and another side wanted to go into law and politics. I had great goals. I did not want to be an ordinary person.

If I went into the ministry I tried to figure out a way that I possibly could become Pope. I wanted to be at the top of my profession. And if I went into law and politics I wanted to be president. It's amazing how your attitudes change over a number of years and you begin to see that Christian life is meant to be a service and not necessarily climbing the ladder. Although that may be involved as God leads.

With these ambitions, I share that to give you a context for this little story. One time a group of us college students were in a class discussing life or whatever. One of the students in the class who was an upperclassman, a junior or senior, said, "When I finish college what I want to do is be a school teacher and live a very ordinary life." That struck me as the dullest most boring waste to God kind of life that anyone could want. I was very judgmental of his spiritual commitment. I had thrived on too many sermons, which said do something great for God to be content with this person saying, I want to live an ordinary life.

But as time has gone on I have begun to realize that there is a splendor in an ordinary life that is lived extraordinarily. That the world couldn't go on and the church couldn't go on with out a lot of us ordinary people. That that can be God's will that we not become one of the kings or the judges or the famous people. But that we be ordinary. And God in the midst of ordinary people is aware of their life. That's the great message of Ruth. He is aware of the ordinary person in a turbulent time. He's aware of Naomi and all her problems and situation.

That's one contrast that I see here.

Another contrast that I see at the beginning of this story is that there's a contrast between the name of their town and their life situation. The name of their town is Bethlehem. It means literally in the Hebrew means "House of bread." Bethlehem was in the area that was the Kansas of Palestine. It was the breadbasket. The wheat and barley producing region. Yet the place that was the House of bread was empty. There was a famine in the land.

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

This speaks to me that there are times in life where what has proved to us in the past to be splendid resources become in a certain moment bereft of those resources and we go elsewhere looking for sustenance. What has yesterday or the year before seemed so promising has suddenly become vacant or empty.

Some would look at the book of Ruth rather judgmentally and attempt to put the filter of our eyes upon it and say, The reason why there was famine in Ruth is that someone wasn't trusting God and he sent the famine as a rebuke. That could have been the case. But not all famine is the result of sin. It may be that the situation we have unfolding in the book of Ruth is somewhat like Job's situation. Perhaps too somewhere in Moabite land there was a young woman whose heart reached out for God. And God allowed a situation to occur to reach her.

We may not always know why it is that God is turning a house of bread situation and allowing us to experience famine. But that's a contrast, a very real contrast in life that before Christ we see happening.

Another contrast in this story is the names of the parents in contrast to the names of the children. Elimelech the husband, his name means "my God is king." Isn't that a great name? The Hebrews had a delightful way of gathering up the personality of a person in a single name and giving that name great meaning.

Naomi's name was "pleasant, lovely, delightful." How would you have liked to have received a wedding invitation: "The parents of Delightful invite you to the marriage of their daughter to My God is king." Wonderful names. Beautifully descriptive of a walk with God and a pleasant personality in life.

How then do people with such beautiful names give such names to their children? Mahlon comes along, the first born son. His name means "Weak or sick." A little baby is born and is cradled in the arms. The parent looks down at him and says, "Sick." Maybe when he was born he was just barely hanging on as sometimes a name was given that way. The first impression of a child. This little child was sick so he was called Sick.

The second child came along Chilion. His name means "Failing. Pining. Consumptive or even annihilation." So here are two little boys – Sick and Consumptive. Born to My God is king and Beautiful, pleasant.

There's a view going around in the body of Christ today that says that what you say is what you get. There's some truth to that. Not all of that statement is false. I think it is false on occasion. But there's some truth to that. The labels that we put on people are often the things we have to live with. Especially if we begin putting them on them as children.

I can remember as a child I was very clumsy and I was called on occasion "clumsy." I was always banging my head into something. I could never fix anything that had anything mechanical to do with it. To this day I'm helpless before a sink that goes awry. Clumsy.

**Naomi and Elimelech appear not to be God's people of faith and power. The names of their children may reflect that. And when the going gets tough, they get going. The wrong way. They leave. No staying power.

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

I'm therefore impressed with God's compassion toward Naomi as it unfolds in this story. There are some in the body of Christ today who come along and when there's any suffering that is going on or any alienation or what we would call untoward experience happening, they've been exposed to a teaching which says if that is happening to you it's because you brought it on your own self. You didn't have enough faith or trust in God. And you will suffer in that experience until you change your attitude.

There can be some truth on occasion for that kind of thing. But on the other hand I've noticed that those who say and practice this kind of teaching easily develop a non-compassionate spirit. Which precedes like Job's counselors to pronounce accusation and judgment on God's people who suffer. And who say I will not extend anything to you until you have learned your lesson.

How unlike that attitude is the God of Naomi. Who in the midst of her separation over in the land of Moab is yet full of compassion for her and who doesn't in any way put the blame or the onus on her but has some marvelous things in mind for her.

If God withheld his compassion from us because we had in some way failed him we would really be very destitute of hope. But God never stops being compassionate. Those are some of the contrasts that I see in this story, sort of as an outset. It's not hard as you go along through the first chapter of Ruth to find that why it is that Naomi from being a pleasant and delightful person moves toward a path of bitterness. Chapter 1 tells us that story. There's several things that tend to incite or awaken bitterness within her life.

I think it begins with her move. For a lot of wives and mothers that can awaken things, especially if her husband comes in one day and announces, We're moving. That can be tough. To be plucked a way from family and friends. Probably Bethlehem was a place where generations had grown up before her in her family. Now she's separated from that in an alien culture. That can produce some feelings of bitterness. Having to suddenly relocate and dislocate.

Then that's followed by the death of her husband. An experience which I can't really talk about because I haven't experienced that kind of loss. Some of you here have. An experience then that is succeeded by the death of her two children after ten years of marriage. Mahlon and Chilion did grow up and became old enough to be married and were married ten years. Then they both died and died childless. Another source of bitterness.

She says to her daughters in law in 1:12 that in addition to that she is now past the age of mothering. There is now no pretentiality for having children. That of course was something very treasured in Hebrew society and should be very treasured now.

And finally her bitterness finds itself in expression against God. As many times bitterness often finally becomes directed against God. We interpret the data of life and it seems to us that God is sending it our way. So she says in verse 13 as she bids good bye to her daughters in law "Would you remain unmarried even if I could have children to grow up. No my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you because the Lord's hand has gone out against me." She's saying to them, You have the loss of your husband. And that's bitter for you. But it's even more bitter for me because God's hand has gone out against me. She's inferring that God's hand has not gone out against them.

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

That's what makes it bitter. God himself has turned his back on me.

It's often the case that we take our circumstances in life and attribute them to God. Many times unfairly and unjustly.

I was told this story about a pastor in a college church in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. There was a man in the church there that had gone out speed boating on the ocean. His boat capsized one evening about a mile off shore. He had his five children in the boat. He tied a line around each of his five kids and swam towing them to shore. When he pulled them up on shore he discovered to his horror that they had all drowned. He went to the pastor and said to him, "How can this be God's will?" The pastor very sternly but in love replied "God's will was for you to provide life jackets in the boat."

Many times we blame God unfairly for our responsibility.

A little boy I heard about on the radio this last week. His parents had painted his bedroom and he had closeted himself in his room and taken a chisel instrument and poked holes all over the wall. When his parents came in they were furious. They wanted to get him within an inch of his life. They were mad at this little kid and he knew that punishment was coming. They asked him the question that of course has no answer. But parents always ask children when they do something like this. Why did you do that? His response was I asked God first if it was ok and he didn't say no.

God gets a lot of blame for things he don't do!

That's kind of where Naomi is at. She comes back to her home, is greeted by her friends. They lift up their voice upon seeing her again. And she announces to them this, "Don't call me pleasant any more. Call me Mara. Call me bitter. For the Lord as dealt bitterly with me." Or as Moffett translation puts it to help us understand the play on words in English, "Call me Mara for the almighty has marred me."

What if someone came up here in the front of the church this morning and announced to us, "Don't call me by my given name any more. Call sister bitter." We would say if anyone said that to us we would immediately recognize that there is a whole lot of hurt and anger and problems that is there that a person who would feel so strongly about that they would say, Don't call me pleasant any more. Call me bitter.

As I came to this part in the story I thought what if Naomi had come to me as her pastor and I only knew the part of the story she was at at that moment in her life that ends with 1:21 and she had come to me and said, Pastor, from now on when you appoint me to any committee in the church put down, Sister bitter is on that committee. I probably wouldn't have put her on any committee.

How could I as a pastor have helped Naomi? Or how could you as a Christian friend as a lay counselor help her? I thought of some ways that I would not help her. Some false ways of assistance. I share with these with you because I think God is speaking to some hearts here today that sort of have a bitter-sweet experience. And he's sharing some things with you through me.

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

One thing I would not do with Naomi is I would not agree with her. I would not say with her, I'm going to agree to call you Bitter. I think there are some moment in life where the people around us can't go along with our pessimism and in a loving way have to say I'm not going to be that pessimistic about you.

If everyone around us became as pessimistic as we may be about ourselves then we really have gotten ourselves in a pit from which it's rough to be dugged out. Somebody's got to have some faith and hope. I don't think I would want to agree with that assessment.

I think another thing about Naomi that I would not do is I would not put her down. I wouldn't try to go to Naomi and say, "Let's find the sin in your life. Why you lost your husband and sons and the like." Granted there are occasions in life when what has happened to us may be as a result of sin. But so often it is not the case. So often we weight people down with judgmentalism that is in our heart rather than the upbuilding compassion and love of Jesus Christ. I don't find Jesus ever putting people down.

Nor would I give Naomi an instant solution. I would not hand her a book and say "Read this book one chapter a day and at the end of eight days you will be completely out of your problem. God will have delivered you because I've got the keys." We like instant solutions.

I like instant solutions. But for some things there are no instant solutions.

What ways could I help Naomi? What ways could you help Naomi?

I think I would want to affirm Naomi. I would want to say to Naomi as she comes in with her talk of bitterness and woe. Naomi you must have done something right. Look at how Ruth loves you. Now I think it's a remarkable thing that in-laws can be so in love with one another as Ruth and Naomi. That suggests that there is a side to Naomi that Naomi is not telling about herself. A side that has one in love. In fact the love is so strong that when she leaves her daughters in law, or when she thinks she is leaving them, Orpah the other daughter in law who often gets the wrong end of the stick. She's blamed and accused for all kinds of things. Actually I think Orpah was trying to be obedient. She had a rough choice and we don't know all that was involved. She went back. But it's striking that Orpah threw her arms around Naomi. They embraced together. There was love between them. She had somehow in the midst of all that alienation and alien culture and the like managed to love. I would say, "Naomi, at heart you're a loving person. And Ruth is testimony to that."

I would say to her too, Naomi you've maintained your belief in God. It may be a little bit damaged right at this point and you may be saying some things about God that later you'll correct. But she hadn't given up talking about God's place in her life. I would want to affirm that.

I would want to give her some hope too. I would want to take her to the scripture and say, Naomi, the scriptures are given to us as a word of hope. You say, Wait a minute pastor. Naomi lived in a time when there wasn't a lot of scripture written. That's true. Only six books before Ruth. But I think I could take Naomi to the book of Genesis the scroll of Genesis in what we now know as Genesis 42:36 and incident out of Jacob's life. He has lost years ago his son Joseph he thinks to death. A famine has come on the land. He has sent ten of his remaining eleven sons into Egypt to secure grain. They have come back to him with a story that the master

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

that they met in Egypt has kept the older brother Simeon and is demanding as a condition for the release of his hostage that they send back the last son, Jacob's last son, Benjamin, if they're ever to get grain again. Jacob of course does not know that the master in Egypt is Joseph.

So when the brothers have brought the word to him, Jacob responds, "You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more. And now you want to take Benjamin. Every thing is against me." If he only knew! Everything was just about to come out all right. But his reading of events was totally different of how God at that moment was reading events and how reality really was. So often our perception is not in accordance with what God may be really doing at that moment.

All I could say is don't pass judgment until the Lord is finished with you. Naomi didn't pass judgment God until you're done. Until it's all said and done. Don't pass judgment.

I would want to give her some hope. I would want to give you some hope.

What happened to Naomi? Some great things happened mainly because of a loving daughter in law. Ruth goes out into the field and manages to hit the right field, the right one. Meet the right person. Isn't that like God to lead us through ordinary circumstances? Boaz, the owner of the field, takes a liking to her. At the end of the day he makes sure that she's got enough grain from the pickings to take home. In fact she has an ephah of grain. An ephah is about 22 liters or about four or five gallons. About 5 gallons of grain she's carrying home. That was a lot for a gleaner, a person who picked up the leftovers.

In fact, a comparison is when the children of Israel were in the wilderness and they picked up manna they only picked up one tenth of an ephah a day. So they only had one tenth to eat that Ruth is carrying home.

Naomi looked at this, verse 20. She has heard the story that Boaz had made this possible. She says, "The Lord bless him. The Lord has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead." That to me is an intriguing insight into Naomi. It indicates that with all the bitterness she had experienced in life she was ready to reassess and change her views. She was ready to refocus on the future and not simply dwell on the past.

When Ruth returned, after all, she could have said, it's a fluke. It wouldn't happen again. Our luck is always on the bitter end. You better avoid that field the next day because Boaz probably has an ulterior motive that you wouldn't like. She could have been extremely negative.

But instead she was positive. She, by the way, makes the mistake about God that so many of us do make of singling out some experience and judging God by that experience alone. When her sons die and all is taken from her she says, God has turned against me. But the minute Ruth comes home with five gallons of grain she said, The Lord is for me! She judges God by what at that moment is happening in her life. She is what we would call a young Christian. She is immature in faith, in God. In believing that God's attitude fluctuates according to the nature of our circumstances. Failing to realize that God's attitude toward us is constant and steady and abiding.

Chapter 3:18 shows us that her faith ultimately becomes strong enough to even support Ruth who has shown such love. Chapter 3 is about Ruth and Boaz at the place where grain is

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

threshed. In the evening according with custom to indicate her interest in Boaz, Ruth sleeps at Boaz's feet. When Boaz awakens in the morning there is Ruth and he is extremely flattered that this beautiful woman has an interest in him. He vowed as her kinsman redeemer to buy the land that belonged the Mahlon and Chilion and with the land therefore to have her as his wife.

He's got to take care of a transaction though at the city gate. Ruth comes home and she is all excited. In fact what has happened to her is that when Boaz parted from her in the morning he had given her according to verse 18, six measures of barley. He said to her that morning, "Bring to me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out. As she did so he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her." The Bible doesn't specifically say what the instrument of measurement was. It just says six measures. We don't know six measures of what. But it's certain that she would have brought home more than she had brought home the first day which was simply an ephah or about five gallons.

The best guess – there are several measurements that could have been used – but the best guess that would have made up six measures would be an amount somewhere around 88 pounds of grain. We know it was a lot because it says "He put it on her." So she comes back either with a sack of grain of 88 pounds on her shoulder or head. As she is walking back she is ready to say to Naomi "He loves me. Look at the load he put on my back."

Aren't cultures funny in terms of what is a sign of love? "He loves me. I got 88 pounds!"

But she's probably just worried. Will he really go through with what he says? For Naomi it doesn't take a lot of shrewd inside to see but Ruth evidently didn't have the insight. Naomi says, "Wait my daughter until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today." Naomi says any man who puts 88 pounds of grain on your back has got to love you. He'll take care of it. He won't rest. She buoys herself up in this moment with her faith.

The end of the book of Ruth tells us that blessing comes to Naomi. Ruth and Boaz marry. The Lord enables Ruth to conceive. She gives birth to a son. The women say to Naomi, "Praise the Lord who this day has not left you without a kinsman redeemer. May he become famous throughout all Israel. He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter in law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons has given birth."

That's an incredible complement by the way in that culture. I can remember in my day in northwest China if you asked a Chinese man in that day and in that culture how many children he had he would only give you the number of children that were male. If he had seven daughters and one son and you asked him how many children he had he'd say, one. Because girls didn't count. Men were important.

These women say to Naomi, She, your daughter in law from Moab is better to you than seven sons, which was the ideal family – seven sons.

Is it the case that often that God's ways are not fully understood until some time has elapsed? If we stop Naomi's story at the end of chapter one when she comes back bitter, we've stopped it too soon. We have to go on.

In fact, if we stop Naomi's life with simply that she had a grandson, we've stopped the story too soon. That's why the writer of Ruth goes on to give a genealogy at the close. The last verse of

THE BITTERSWEET MOTHER

that genealogy, the last verse of Ruth says, “*Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse and Jesse the father of David.*” The great, great grandson of Naomi is the king David. Naomi wouldn’t in her flesh see that. She would only see that from the vertigo point of glory. God wasn’t through working out the wrap up of that story until another hundred years had gone by.

It may take a hundred years to see what God was ultimately up to in a trial or a difficulty. I am a third generation believer who is living with the benefit won for me by grandparents who died before I was born who served God. We cannot judge God simply within the time frame of this immediate moment or this immediate year or this immediate decade. Or even my immediate life. God may be working out something so grand it takes a hundred years to complete.

Blessing comes ultimately to all who put their trust in Christ. It may not be fully understood in a lifetime.

“Not till the loom is silent and the shuttle ceased to fly will God unroll the canvas and explain the reasons why. The dark threads are as needful in the weaver’s skillful hand as the threads of gold and silver in the pattern he has planned.”

Our Father, we come to you today with a renewed consciousness of your individual compassion and care for us as your people. I bring before you today all the persons in this congregation who most recently have passed through a difficult moment in their life. We hear your word of counsel and hope for us today. Saying, Don’t call it the end until I’m finished with you. We thank you, Lord. We address you as the eternal God. We realize when we do what that means for us. We’re children of time, creatures of the moment. But you are eternal. And in your great grace you purposed that all who will come to you will enjoy your eternity with you and gain in the eternal age the perspective of a life that you yourself have now. I pray for all the mothers here. The mothers of grown children, some of whom are away from you. Some of whom are serving you. I pray, Lord, for those who have gone away from you. That on this day of honoring mothers that to their hearts would come again that truth which you have sown in their life through the seed of mother’s prayers and mother’s love. And that not one of mother’s children would be outside of your love and care and your state of grace. I pray that such children would not see relationship with you as simply salvation from hell to be experienced and a death bed conversion. But I pray too that they will see it as an opportunity to serve you in life with strength and vigor. I thank you too that you receive us at whatever moment we come to you in life – young or old. You do not cast us aside but you take us for yourself. I pray for mothers with growing children that you will give them your insight your strength, your blessing. That in moments that it appears that within a child here are difficulties to be worked through that you would help us not forget the long haul. That there is a plan and a program. That with your help will be worked out for this child. We lean upon you anew today, Lord. We trust you anew. And we thank you for your grace at work in our life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.