

“Unfailing Love”

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Ruth 1: 1-17 (NRSV)

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Today is Mother’s Day. This is a day that honours the love, the sacrifice, the unpaid and easily taken-for-granted work of a mother.

It is not always carnations and breakfast in bed. It can be a challenging day, and a day of difficult emotions. I know people who won’t go to church on Mother’s Day because it is too painful. It is a difficult day for those who longed to be mothers but were never able to be. It is a difficult day for those whose mother or child has died. It is a difficult day for those who feel they failed in the motherhood department, and for those who had mothers who didn’t come close to being the model of a Hallmark-Card perfect mother. And it’s difficult for those who have a strained or no relationship with their mother or their child. Sometimes when you hold up an ideal mother, all you see are the shadows of imperfection.

As Christians, it is important to honour and give thanks to God for our mothers, but just as important is to hold up those qualities and to see them and honour them wherever they are found.



Last week I talked about the ‘Good Shepherd’ and we talked about the Hebrew word *hesed*.

There isn’t a word for *hesed* in English, so it gets translated in a number of ways. In the 23rd Psalm it gets translated as ‘goodness and mercy’, and in many other places it gets translated as “loving kindness” and in other places simply ‘love’. It is not just an emotion — it is a love that has *action* as part of it.

A statement by Rabbi Simlai in the Talmud claims that "The Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) begins with *hesed* and ends with *hesed*. *Hesed* is love with hands and feet. It is a love that is unfailing and has made a commitment.”

When we think about the highest qualities of a mother’s love, that’s what we are talking about. Friends, that’s what God’s love is like. Most of us understood God’s love first through having our own mother love us unconditionally and through doing the work and the caregiving of love.

The scripture we read this morning from the book of Ruth describes to me that love most beautifully. This is a story not of a mother and daughter but of a mother and daughter-in-law. I love it all the more for that. It is a story where the idea of family is stretched beyond what we normally think of, and I love that too. Family and that unfailing love are found in all kinds of places not limited to our mothers.

Once upon a time, a woman named Naomi and her husband left their home in Bethlehem because of a famine in the land. They moved to the country of Moab and there they raised two sons who grew up and married local women. Sadly, sometime later, Naomi's husband died; then both of her sons ended up dying too.

This was an unspeakable tragedy. We can only imagine her grief at losing her husband and her sons, but it was even worse than that. During this time in history, women needed to be in the care of men. If your husband died, then your sons would look after you, but with neither husband nor sons, she had nothing. There was no welfare system. There was no one to provide for her financially, and no one to provide for her physical security. She was older and alone and incredibly vulnerable. She realized that her only chance was to return back to her former homeland and hope she could find some distant relative who might take pity on her. There was no question that her daughters-in-law needed to return to their parents' homes because there was no way she could provide for them.

When she urges them to go home, the one daughter-in-law, Orpah, kisses her good-bye and returns home, but the Bible says that Ruth clings to her. And when pushed to leave, Ruth says those beautiful words that many of you know so well:



"Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17)

What caused Ruth to stay with Naomi? Naomi, as I mentioned, had nothing to offer her daughter-in-law except a future likely filled with great poverty and risk to her physical safety and health.

Returning to her home and trying to find another man to marry would have been a better option for Ruth, but her commitment led her to put Naomi first and herself and her own needs second. But though the sense of duty is strong, Ruth clearly isn't doing it solely because she "should" do it. She cares for her mother-in-law deeply and can't bear to part with her. Despite the foolishness of it and her own fear, she makes a covenant with Naomi to stay with her and to be with her for better or for worse.

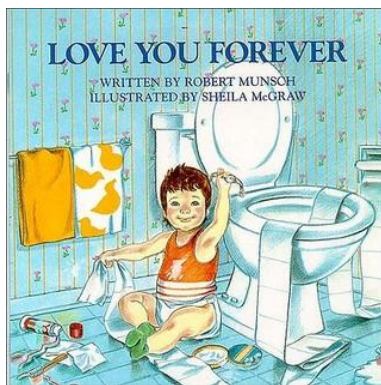
There were two qualities in Ruth that came together powerfully. The first was a great sense of duty, and the second was a great fondness for her mother-in-law: commitment and caring—*hesed*. The whole book of Ruth, which is only 4 chapters long, is a beautiful example of *hesed*. That is a powerful love and a powerful combination. Covenant and commitment, combined with compassion is a force to be reckoned with. Without that caring and compassion, duty and commitment can be judgmental, self-centered and even angry.

On the other hand, when you care about someone but don't have any sense of duty or commitment, you tend to be there when it suits you and when things are good. But when times get tough there's a good chance you will bail on the person.

The journey of these two widows back to Bethlehem is not easy, but they are guided and carried by the unfailing love of God. By the grace of God a distant relative of Naomi's and a very good man named Boaz, who is more than able to provide, falls in love with Ruth and makes a commitment to support them. Boaz and Ruth had a son named Obed. The punch line of the book comes at the very end: "Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David." (Ruth 4:17) David! This obscure, vulnerable outsider ends up being the great-grandmother of Israel's greatest king and an ancestor of Jesus.

God cares about you and his love will never ever fail.

This reminds me of another beautiful story that you probably have



heard before but I'm going to read it again. I could probably read it off by heart; I've read it so many times.

It is called *Love You Forever*, and was written by Robert Munsch and illustrated by Sheila McGraw. (Hear and see the full story: <https://youtu.be/-ES-fp2fdzk>)ⁱ

The story opens with a picture of a young mother rocking her newborn baby boy and singing:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be.*

We see the boy growing up in various hilariously trying stages: a terrible two flushing his mother's watch down the toilet; a sloppy nine-year old who hates baths and always says bad words when his grandma visits; a teenager with weird friends, weird clothes, and weird music; and after each scene, at night when he is sound asleep, his mother takes him in her arms, rocks him, and sings:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be.*

When he grows to be a man, and moves to a new house across town, sometimes, at night, the mother straps a ladder to the roof of her car, drives across town, and puts the ladder up to his bedroom window. If he is sound asleep, she picks him up and rocks him in her arms and sings:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be.*



One day when she is very old she calls him and asks him to visit as she is sick. When her son comes in the door she tries to sing the song but cannot finish it. So he picks her up and rocks her and sings:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, my Mommy you'll be.*

Later that night, when the son returns home, he stands for a long time at the top of the stairs. Then he goes into the room where his new baby daughter is sleeping. He picks her up in his arms and rocks her and sings:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, my baby you'll be.*

You maybe know that this story was born out of pain. Actually, it was the song that came first and later on, the story. The song was born when

his wife gave birth to stillborn twins. For the longest time he couldn't sing the song out loud, but inside he sang the lullaby over and over to the babies who never lived outside the womb.

Hesed is a love that transcends and carries us through the struggles and the pain of life. I read this story not just to make you cry --I'm not sure it's possible to read it without crying—but to remind you that this is the love that God has for you. This is the lullaby that God sings to you. Close your eyes and try to hear God singing this to you:

*I'll love you forever, I'll like you for always,
As long as I'm living, my child you'll be.*

So in all of the beauty and imperfection, in all the thanksgiving and pain of a day that celebrates the love of a mother, remember that God loves with an unfailing love.
Amen.

ⁱ The story *Love You Forever* was read in its entirety by Rev. Kim during the original presentation of this sermon and the band sang the lullaby. Because of copyright laws we were unable to reprint the story here and so we have described it instead. This wonderful book is available in any library or bookstore or you can go to <https://youtu.be/-ES-fp2fdzk> and hear Robert Munsch read it online.