

“Sharing the Load”

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Ruth 1:1-18

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The story of Ruth is such an enduring and beautiful story. It is a story of fierce loyalty and love in the face of adversity and struggle.

It stands out from other books in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, because instead of being about a nation, instead of being about Israel, it is a personal story, a story about a family, a mother and her daughter-in-law and their relationship, their faith and their journey through life.

Because of a famine in Bethlehem, Naomi and her husband and their two sons move to the land of Moab. While they are in Moab, her two sons marry Moabite women. Then it happens that Naomi's husband dies and then both of her sons die also. This was a desperate situation for a woman of that time to be in. Without a husband or even sons, she had no one to take care of her, and being in a foreign land, she had no other family around to care for her either. Naomi had no choice but to return to her homeland, to Bethlehem. The situation was not much better for her daughters-in-law. They also needed a family to support them, but they were still young enough to remarry or to return to their father's house for support.

Naomi chooses to return to her homeland, and she advises the young women to return to their own homes. The one daughter, Orpah, with tears and a kiss, bids farewell to Naomi and heads home. But Ruth refuses to leave Naomi.

In one of the most beautiful passages of scripture she says to Naomi:
“Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, there I will be buried”.

The King James version may be familiar to you.

“Wither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.”

This was a tremendous act of love and compassion on the part of Ruth. Without any assurance that things would go well, she journeyed towards Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi. She simply could not let Naomi bear the weight of her suffering alone. Her love caused her and enabled her to help bear that load.

If Naomi had lived in Canada today and this tragedy happened, it wouldn't have been so catastrophic. The tragedy and the grief would still have been enormous — but not a death threat. Naomi would still have social safety nets like OHIP, Ontario Works or ODSP or Old Age pension. With low levels of unemployment and a relatively wealthy country, the odds are good she would somehow manage. It wouldn't be easy — she would struggle — but she would not have been destitute.

But even with all of our wealth and social safety nets, we have so many people who are lonely and suffering with depression and anxiety. We live in the most connected and yet *disconnected* time ever. Wealthy countries have much higher rates of anxiety and depression than less wealthy countries. The millennial generation has the highest rates of depression and anxiety ever. While the reasons are many and complex, the main reason seems to be a lack of deep connection. Social media is often cited. One website on this topic pointed out:

“Facebook was founded in 2004 and today almost 1.5 billion people use it at least once per day. So one, singular, standalone website is now perused by around 1 in 5 people globally. That's incredible! And Facebook is only one of the many social media giants.

Studies looking at the link between social media and anxiety are relatively easy to find. For instance, one that investigated social media use, sleep, and mental health in over 400 Scottish adolescents revealed that those who used social media the most, particularly at night-time, had lower self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression. There are many studies that show similar results.” Here is a link if you want to read more.

<https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/322877.php>

Linked with the Social Media is the fact that we live more and more isolated lives. For 1000's of years humans lived in small tribes, villages and towns. Moving away from your community was rare.

Community and social connections looked like a spider web — if one strand broke there were still many other strands to support the broken one. I'm not saying the connections were all perfect — human connections have always been challenging! But for better and for worse they were there.

Today the odds of living far away from where you grew up and far away from school friends or from family are high. We are often too busy for connections even when we have them. But we are humans, created for connection, and without it we are afraid and lonely. We fill our emptiness with Social Media and Television and other substances that help ease the pain.

The picture that is painted in the book of Ruth shows us how we should live: knowing we are not alone ... that someone, maybe many people, will come alongside us when we are suffering, and that we will come alongside others when they are hurting.

This past Tuesday a small and mighty group of people helped to



move our newest Refugee family from Afghanistan into their new apartment in Kingston. We had planned for them to move to Brockville, but the mother's health needs were too great and they were advised to settle in Kingston. For the month of September, the three stayed in our

home. We got rid of two kids on the Labour Day weekend to universities and moved three adults in! We have lots of room in our house (though only 1 full bathroom and one-half bathroom, so that made life interesting!) It made for a busy month, but my culinary skills have widened and they were wonderful guests.

Even with gracious and helpful guests there is always more work, more logistics, and more chaos. Yet I don't regret for a second forming a

deep connection with a family from across the world from a totally different culture.

My husband said to me when I got back from the move on Tuesday night: "I think we just ran a marathon. But it was worth it." We have such an amazing group of people who surrounded this family and helped to take them to Kingston for dialysis appointments Monday, Wednesday and Fridays, as well as doing things like setting up banking and helping them to look for work in Kingston and so much more.

When I was driving Hamid and his mother to Kingston on the day of the move, Hamid was overwhelmed with gratitude at the help he had received from so many of you and people from other churches. He really couldn't quite believe it. He said to me: "This is so historical for me. We have never had anyone else to help us. It has only been our family. No one would help us. I thought we were alone." Then he said: "Those people at your church they are like...they are like...they are like *angels*."

I told him that they were not alone, and that even as they go to Kingston they are not alone. And then I said "The truth is you were *never* alone. Even when people were not there for you — God was always with you."

We have a deep need to know that we are not alone. I think that's why the United Church Creed took root and became such an enduring creed. "*In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone*". It think it's also why the 23rd Psalm is so beloved, because life can be so very hard. We desperately need to be led by a good shepherd, by someone who will lead us to still waters and who will be with us in the dark valleys to guide and protect.

At this point in the message our choir sang a version of that beautiful passage from Psalm 23. (Pastor Kim returns to speak)

I started my sermon by saying that part of the charm of the story of Ruth is that it is a personal story instead of being a story about a nation. But it ended up being a part of that larger nation story and even a part of our story today. You may remember that Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David, and great-great ever-so-great grandmother to Jesus.

I pray that you have deep relationships in your life. Maybe they are with family, or maybe they are with friends who become like family.

Sometimes when we can't or don't have relationships with our family, God will bring other people alongside us to help us bear our burdens, even as we help them bear their burdens.

But even if everyone else leaves you, Jesus never will leave you alone. If you let him into your heart you will have a peace that passes understanding, you will have strength through the battles of life, and you will have rest for your souls.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

(Matthew 11:28-30)