

Loss and Redemption

Ruth 4

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next-of-kin, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by. So Boaz said, "Come over, friend; sit down here." And he went over and sat down. ²Then Boaz took ten men of the elders of the city, and said, "Sit down here"; so they sat down. ³He then said to the next-of-kin, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. ⁴So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you." So he said, "I will redeem it." ⁵Then Boaz said, "The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance." ⁶At this, the next-of-kin said, "I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it." ⁷Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. ⁸So when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, "Acquire it for yourself," he took off his sandal.

⁹Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. ¹⁰I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses." ¹¹Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; ¹²and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

¹³So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." ¹⁶Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. ¹⁷The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. ¹⁸Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, ¹⁹Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, ²⁰Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, ²¹Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, ²²Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. (NRSV)

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a story of profound, painful loss. In previous sermons this month, we've talked in some detail about the losses they experienced. Now in chapter 4, the story turns wonderfully toward redemption: Ruth and Naomi bounce back into the good life. Ruth marries a sterling man named Boaz; they give birth to a healthy son named Obed; and Naomi becomes a joyful grandmother. In fact, the English text of chapter 4 uses

words like redeem and redemption seven times. The story clearly wants us to think about redemption.

Not everyone experiences redemption exactly like Ruth and Naomi did. Some people lose a spouse, but never remarry like Ruth did. Some people face the loss of infertility, but never have a child like Obed. Some people emigrate to a new country, but never marry a local citizen who rescues them from poverty, like Ruth did. Some older people want to become grandparents, but never become one like Naomi did.

Our stories are different. Yet the story of Ruth and Naomi compels us to look for redemption in our own stories. After your losses, where have you experienced God's redemption? After the pain and agony you felt, how did God come to you? The book of Ruth wants you and me to look for the pathways of redemption that we have experienced in our own lives.

To find the pathways of redemption in our own lives, sometimes it helps to hear other people's stories. So I'd like to tell you the story of a man named Jerry Sittser.

First you must hear Jerry's story of loss.

In the fall of 1991, Jerry and Lynda Sittser were driving their minivan back home from an outing in rural Idaho. Riding along in their van were their four children and Jerry's mother. Around 8:30 PM an accident happened, which I will let Jerry tell you about in his own words.

Ten minutes into our trip home I noticed an oncoming car on a lonely stretch of highway driving extremely fast. I slowed down at a curve, but the other car did not. It jumped its lane and smashed head-on into our minivan. I learned later that the alleged driver was Native American, drunk, driving eighty-five miles per hour. He was accompanied by his pregnant wife, also drunk, who was killed in the accident.

I remember those first moments after the accident as if everything was happening in slow motion. They are frozen into my memory with a terrible vividness. After recovering my breath, I turned around to survey the damage. The scene was chaotic. I remember the look of terror on the faces of my children and the feeling of horror that swept over me when I saw the unconscious and broken bodies of Lynda, my four-year-old daughter Diana Jane, and my mother. I remember getting Catherine (then eight), David (seven), and John (two) out of the van through my door, the only one that would open. I remember taking pulses, doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, trying to save the dying and calm the living. I remember the feeling of panic that struck my soul as I watched Lynda, my mother, and Diana Jane all die before my eyes. I remember the pandemonium that followed—people gawking, lights flashing from emergency vehicles, a helicopter whirring overhead, cars lining up, medical experts doing what they could to help. And I remember the realization sweeping over me that I would soon plunge into a darkness from which I might never again emerge as a sane, normal, believing man.

In the hours that followed the accident, the initial shock gave way to an unspeakable agony. I felt dizzy with grief's vertigo, cut off from family and friends, tormented by the loss, nauseous from the pain. After arriving at the hospital, I paced the floor like a caged animal, only recently captured. I was so bewildered that I was unable to voice questions or think rationally. I felt wild with fear and agitation, as if I was being stalked by some deranged killer from whom I could not escape. I could not stop crying. I could not silence the deafening noise of crunching metal, screaming sirens, and wailing children. I could not rid my eyes of the vision of violence, of shattering glass and shattered bodies. All I wanted was to be dead. Only the sense of responsibility for my three surviving children and the habit of living for forty years kept me alive.

That torrent of emotion swept away the life I had cherished for so many years. In one moment my family as I had known and cherished it was obliterated. The woman to whom I had been married for two decades was dead; my beloved Diana Jane, our third born, was dead;

my mother, who had given birth to me and raised me, was dead. Three generations—gone in an instant!

That initial deluge of loss slowly gave way over the next months to the steady seepage of pain that comes when grief, like floodwaters refusing to subside, finds every crack and crevice of the human spirit to enter and erode. I thought that I was going to lose my mind. I was overwhelmed with depression. The foundation of my life was close to caving in.¹

Like Jerry, many of us in this congregation have experienced some type of loss. Losses come in many sizes and shapes, not just car accidents. Other losses include terminal illness, disability, divorce, abuse, chronic unemployment, mental illness, extreme disappointment, and eventually death. Each loss is unique to the person who experiences it. Sometimes we compare our loss to someone else's to see which one is worse. At other times we try to be empathetic and say things like "I know just how you feel," as if our loss is just like their loss. However no two losses are the same. Each person's loss leaves a unique kind of suffering.

Some losses happen suddenly, like a car crash or a pink slip that says we no longer have a job. Other losses happen gradually over a long time. I think of my mother, whose cancer lasted many years until it killed her; or of my mother-in-law, whose Alzheimer's disease developed over many years. Loss is always bad news, but it unfolds for different people in different ways, depending on their circumstances.

Let us return to the story of Jerry Sittser. Three years after the accident, Jerry realized he would continue to feel this tragedy's effects for the rest of his life. He knew that in a sense he'd never "get over" or "recover" from the

¹ Jerry Sittser, *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*, expanded edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, 2004), 25-27.

accident. And yet three years afterward, Jerry realized some good was coming from the accident. The accident itself was bad, but it was having some good effects on him. Says Jerry:

I still have a sorrowful soul; yet I wake up every morning joyful, eager for what the new day will bring. Never have I felt as much pain as I have in the last three years; yet never have I experienced as much pleasure in simply being alive and living an ordinary life. Never have I felt so broken; yet never have I been so whole. Never have I been so aware of my weakness and vulnerability; yet never have I been so content and felt so strong. Never has my soul been more dead; yet never has my soul been more alive. What I once considered mutually exclusive—sorrow and joy, pain and pleasure, death and life—have become parts of a greater whole. . . .

Above all, I have become aware of the power of God's grace and my need for it. My soul has grown because it has been awakened to the goodness and love of God. God has been present in my life these past three years. . . . God is growing in my soul, making it bigger, and filling it with . . . [God's] self. . . . Loss can diminish us, but it can also expand us. It depends . . . on the choices we make and the grace we receive. Loss can function as a catalyst to transform us. It can lead us to God, the only One who has the desire and power to give us life."²

I believe Ruth and Naomi also learned that loss is an opportunity for God to work redemptively. Yes, the effects of the loss will perhaps linger for the rest of our lives. But just as the loss of crucifixion was an opportunity for God to work resurrection, so too is our loss a chance for God, with our cooperation, to work some kind of redemption.

Where, how, and when has God worked redemption in your life?

² Sittser, chapter 15.