

Loss
Ruth 1.1-5, 19-22
Sermon by Dan Schrock
August 6, 2017

¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. . . .

¹⁹So the two of them [Naomi and Ruth] went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" ²⁰She said to them, "Call me no longer Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. ²¹I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty; why call me Naomi when the LORD has dealt harshly with me, and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" ²²So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. (NRSV)

I

In February 2016, Laura Kelly Fanucci gave birth to identical twin daughters, named Margaret and Abigail. Both babies were premature, both had twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome, and both died in their parents' arms within two days.

Laura, the mother, was well-acquainted with loss and grief long before the death of her twin daughters. When she was 10 years old, her brother Jay died, an event that profoundly shaped her psycho-social-spiritual development as a young person growing up in the Catholic church. When she and her husband Franco married, they were able to have three healthy boys. But they also experienced the loss of a child to miscarriage. And now, their twin daughters died.

Laura blogs at [Mothering Spirit: Everyday Parenting as Spiritual Practice](#), where she writes about parenting and loss. Her blog entries explore the emotional territories of loss and gift, grief and grace, sadness and joy. In one astonishing entry, she describes how she and her husband were unaccountably transported into joy when they [held one of their dying twins](#) in their arms. In another entry, she writes poignantly about [her to-do list](#), which has two things on it: order a gravestone for her dead twin daughters, and buy a car seat for the new child that is growing inside her.

In yet another entry, she details [how complicated and problematic Mother's Day is](#) for many women: for women who've miscarried, women who've had abortions, women who've been trying to conceive for years, women who've birthed stillborn children, women who've lost a child later in life to disease or accident. She points out how even a simple question like "how many children do you have?" can be complicated to answer. For both mothers and fathers, that question can tug at the heart. Do you just count your children who are still alive? Or do you add in the miscarriages, the stillborns, or the son who died at age 17 in a hunting accident? Is the right answer 3 living children, 5 if you include the twins who died within 2 days, or 6 if you also include the stillborn one? In the case of my own parents, did the question include all the miscarriages or not? Was the correct answer 3 children or 11 children? And does the person asking me how many children I have really want to know that level of detail or not?

II

Parents are not the only ones who experience loss.

- You dream of becoming a surgeon, but then an accident permanently damages your fine motor skills, making the dream impossible.
- For 19 years, you've worked long, hard hours for your employer, putting in lots of overtime—and then the boss fires you because you weren't performing well enough.
- You and your congregation lose a pastor, thanks to complicated government regulations.

III

The biblical book of Ruth tells the story of Naomi, an Israelite woman who experiences enormous loss. Her losses are multi-layered. The first layer of loss is family, when she loses her husband and then both sons, leaving her with no blood relatives. The second layer of loss is economic. Without husband or sons, who will raise the crops and tend the sheep? How will she get enough food to eat? These are grave concerns since she

is an immigrant and the Moabite government has no Medicaid or Medicare or Social Security.

The third layer of loss is spiritual. Naomi thought she could trust God to take care of her. She had grown up hearing stories of how the Lord God delivered Israel from the ravages of Egypt, and of how God fed them with manna and quail in the wilderness. Until now, she had believed God would look after her and provide for her. But with the specter of long, slow starvation staring her in the face, Naomi believes God has abandoned her and brought this calamity upon her. God, she feels, is her enemy. So as a result, Naomi is bitter. Call me Mara (or “Bitter”), she tells her friends, for God has treated me bitterly. I’m bitter and God is bitter, so just go ahead and call me Bitter.

Do you hear the deep grief of this woman? Can you imagine the extensive losses she is suffering? Do you perceive how frustrated are her dreams, and how small is her hope?

IV

Loss has long-term consequences. Some years ago I knew a man who owned and operated a small business here in Goshen. When the economy went south and his debt outgrew his income, the bank foreclosed on him. That event affected him for the next 35 years. He was ashamed about the failure of his business and bitter towards the people who, in his mind, caused the failure to happen.

Laura Kelly Fanucci, the blogger I talked about a few minutes ago, says that [mourning our losses can last a lifetime](#). It has been over 25 years since her brother Jay died, but even after a quarter-century she’s still working with the ramifications of his death. A quarter-century of grief has shaped her into the person she is today. “For 25 years I have been mourning the death of my brother,” she writes. “Grief has walked with me in making a good, grateful, God-seeking life. It taught me that sorrow shapes joy and suffering defines hope.” Another writer, Linda Lawrence Hunt, whose daughter died while serving with Mennonite Central Committee in Bolivia, argues that [coming to so-called “closure” is psychologically unwise](#) and may in fact be impossible anyway.

Since loss is fundamentally a spiritual issue, how can respond to loss when it happens? I offer 3 possibilities.

First, be patient and compassionate with each other, because Christians respond to loss in widely divergent ways. The way you did it will probably not work for your friend, and the way your sister did it will probably not work so well for you. I once knew some parents who lost one of their three adult daughters. Given their daughter's physical challenges, everyone in the family knew she was going to die—and pretty much under what conditions she would die. When death finally came, no one was surprised. But all 4 members of the family dealt with the loss in different ways. The father moped and wept for months afterward, and was barely able to function at work. The mother wept too, but calmly and diligently moved on with the things that had to be done. The older daughter started writing a journal where she could vent her anger at God, and in the process, wrap her soul around her sister's death. The younger sister took up long-distance running, finding that physical activity helped to release her emotions. Same family; 4 different responses.

Second, God is able to heal our losses; yet the scars may still remain. We know theologically from the life of Jesus that this is so. When Jesus was raised from the tomb, resurrection healed the loss of crucifixion, but even so, scars still marked the location of his wounds. This is true for us too. The story is told of [a farmer whose hand got caught in a corn picker](#). It tore his fingers off, then his hand, then part of his lower arm. It even ravaged his face. 40 years later, there were no obvious scars anywhere on his body, other than a missing hand. But of course the emotional and psychological scars remained.

Third, it may be possible to use your loss as an opportunity for a new spiritual practice. [Janice Jean Springer is a pastor with Parkinson's disease](#). At first, the Parkinson's destroyed her spiritual grounding, because she could no longer pray in the way she was used to. The disease forced her to stop praying in her usual ways and start paying a lot of attention to her body:

Finish breakfast at least an hour before the 7 a.m. meds. Practice yoga, but wait until two hours after a meal. Take the yellow pill three times a day, but keep four

*hours between it and the gray pill. Finish lunch an hour before the 1 p.m. meds.
Take this at 4. Do that at 5. Remember this at 7. . . . Oh, and don't be stressed.*

All this attention to her body seemed selfish.

Then a shift began to happen within her. Instead of fighting against Parkinson's so she'd have time for spiritual practices, she turned the Parkinson's itself into a spiritual practice. She sat down and rested between tasks. She took naps. She practiced compassion for every part of her body that wasn't working right. She learned to pray while doing other things.

There are other ways of turning loss into spiritual practice. I've watched someone lose a spouse, and then start a ministry of hospitality in their home. Erland Waltner, who taught Bible at AMBS for many years, went blind in his later years. His sense of hearing was still sharp, however, and was in some ways even heightened. So in those later years, he worked mostly as a spiritual director, where listening is the most important ability.

V

Something along these lines happens to Naomi in the book of Ruth. By the end of the story, Naomi has a new family. Granted, it's not the one she imagined for herself, because she is not related genetically to her daughter-in-law Ruth, to her sort of son-in-law Boaz, or to her sort of grandson Obed. Yet it is a family, and with new joy in the middle of deep sorrow, Naomi applies herself to the spiritual practice of being a good grandmother.

Naomi's female friends accurately sum up the new situation. You have new relatives, they tell her, among them a daughter-in-law who is worth more than 7 sons. Blessed be God, who has restored your life and nourished your old age (Ruth 4.13-17).

May the blessing of God also be upon us, even after our losses.