

“What My Mother Gave Me”

Rev. Barbara H. Gadon

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

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Shortly after Robert and I were married, and we moved into our apartment at the Top of the Hill complex, I was unpacking a box of his cassette tapes. I saw one labeled “Message to My Future Grandchildren” by Bernice Gadon. “Oh, my mother made that before she died,” Robert said. So we lay on our living room carpet, right then and there, to listen. I instantly loved the voice coming out of the machine; a cross between Anne Meara and Maureen Stapleton. Rich, warm - and cut right to the chase. “I would *spoil* you,” she said. She promised them treats and presents, rides on the pontoon boat; basically, to make them dizzy with attention. I would never meet my mother-in-law. Neither of her adult children were anywhere near a committed relationship when she made this tape, and she would die 3 weeks later; but she would be a *bubbee*, a grandmother. This tape overflowed with her hopes.

The most famous lines from the book of Ruth are best known in the King James translation: “Whither thou goest, I shall go. Thy god shall be my god, and thy people shall be my people.” Sometimes couples want to include this passage as a reading in their wedding, and I must gently tell them that these words are not as romantic as they sound. They are spoken by a woman to her mother-in-law, spoken in a time of tragedy. The opening of the book of Ruth, as we heard this morning, is one of the most heart-breaking openings to any book in the Bible. Terrible war and devastation. Naomi, has lost her husband. Ruth and her sister Orpah lose their husbands before they have a chance to bear children. Before this, the two sisters gave up their mothers to get married; as did Naomi when she left Bethlehem to marry outside of her people, the Ephrathites. So much loss. These are all mothers who would find our Mother’s Day a difficult time. And yet the story of Ruth also overflows with hope.

It’s remarkable that the book of Ruth even made it into the Bible, which is a hopeful thing, all by itself. The Hebrew Bible is rich with tales of men - fathers, sons, prophets, and kings – and pretty skimpy when it comes to stories of women. The story of a loving relationship between two women, where the men are pretty much secondary, is even more rare. It’s a story of people loving each other and forming families across ethnic divides, also hopeful. Why should this book even

exist? The most practical reason for the book of Ruth is to explain an anomaly. It ends with a lineage, a listing of ancestors leading up to David and Jesse. It answers the question, “So where did those Moabites come from?” In other words, how did those foreigners make it into our story, the story of our tribe, the Israelites? The Torah frowns mightily on intermarriage. Much of the Hebrew Bible is written by a people in exile or under the threat of extinction. Keeping the Jewish people, well, Jewish, is one of its chief modus operandi. So you have lists of purity laws, such as what you shouldn’t eat, what you can’t wear, and whom you may not marry. Marrying Moabites were strictly forbidden. How did they get in?

Ruth’s answer is that they are extraordinary people, kind to their relatives by marriage, loyal and faithful even when they don’t have to be. They stand in as family to a Hebrew mother when her family is gone. Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their *mother’s* house. There’s a hint here. You would expect her to say, “Go to your FATHER’S house”, but she says “mother’s house”, and this may actually be a clue that their father is also dead, and their mother could use some help. Naomi thanks them for their kindness and wishes new marriages for them both. She even says “Look, I can’t make any more sons for you to marry.” Shoo! Orpah takes her cue to leave. Ruth won’t budge. Commentators make much of Naomi’s speech, that it frees both women to make their own choice. Ruth, they say, gets to make a pure choice about following her mother-in-law. I’m not so sure about this. Do we ever have a pure choice when it comes to our mothers? I hear a few things here that sound... familiar. Naomi says, “No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” *I have nothing, but what are you going to do? You girls run along.*

Does anybody else hear their mother or mother-in-law in this? I’m reminded of the time Jimmy Carter was interviewed by Jon Stewart after he had published a book about his mother, Ruth Carter. Stewart’s mother reportedly said: “I see Jimmy Carter wrote a book about HIS mother. I’m just saying that it’s nice.” (Jewish mothers don’t have the guilt market cornered, either, by the way.) At some point we accept that a little guilt is going to be part of the package. We make our choices to love them, anyway.

At this moment, I believe Ruth decides that she loves her mother-in-law anyway. I believe her words are real: “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

– and there will I be buried.” These are not the words of a woman operating strictly under guilt. They are the words of a passionate heart, of a mind that has been made up independently, perhaps in spite of guilt. They are bold words signifying a bold and somewhat shocking choice.

Ruth is giving up everything. As a widow, she already has very little – but at least she is part of the majority culture, the Moabites. That is to say, she knows the rules of the game, she knows what the deal is. (Greg Brown once said that your home town is where you know what the deal is. You may not like the deal, but you know what it is.) Ruth knows the deal here, and part of the deal is the worship of familiar gods. In this time and place, gods are local. They change from place to place. The text does not say so, but I wouldn’t be surprised if Naomi and Elimilech hadn’t been required to pay some tribute to the Moabite gods. Now the tables are turned, and Ruth will need to change allegiance to the Hebrew god. She has a choice to stay with her own gods, to return to her own mother. Why doesn’t she take it?

For one thing, she and Naomi have shared something profound together. Sister Joan Chittister writes, “Like everyone ever born who goes through sudden, defining loss of any kind, these women find themselves faced with the question: Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was?” (Chittister, “The Story of Ruth: Moments of Loss and Faith.”) Feminist scholars assure us that in the ancient culture these women inhabit, their motherless and husbandless status would make them *nothing*. Nobody. No rights, or perhaps more line with their thinking, no protection. “Everything they had”, says Chittister, “everything they ever thought they wanted, is gone.”

There is a generation of American women, perhaps you or your mother or grandmother belong to it – that felt a profound change within themselves, to the point where they no longer recognized who they were. They were brides in the 1950s and 1960s, and then they felt the ground shift under them when the culture changed. The role of wife and mother just didn’t cut it anymore. Bernice Gadon was one of these women. A timid, anxious bride in 1955, she suddenly found herself a different person. When Robert was 7 and his sister 6, she went back to school, one class at a time at Boston University. When the family moved to Detroit, she graduated from Wayne State University with a masters degree in social work. It was 1971. She was hired by the Salvation Army to set up and run an alcohol treatment program in Grand Rapids, taking her away from her family during the week. Her family missed her, so after 2 -1/2 years, she returned, to

work in a psychiatric hospital, and then at a Jewish home for the aged. In the 1980s, when she got uterine cancer, and the ground shifted underneath her again.

“Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was?” Who are we when we are no longer in a familiar role? When we lose the people who define us? Who are we when we develop cancer? Bernice and eight of her friends founded a Detroit chapter of Gilda’s Club, a support system for women with cancer, like our Wellness Center in Delaware. There was power in people sharing losses with one another. There was power in the sharing of hope.

Another reason Ruth chooses to go with her mother-in-law may just be because she recognizes a kinship with her. Sometimes we find our families later in our lives. Single people often tell me this. Their friends become their family. People who have survived childhood abuse, or whose parents are alcoholics, or are otherwise estranged will sometimes find their families as adults. I would like to just take this moment to honor these chosen or found mothers in our lives. They stand in; they love us and we love them; we recognize one another as family. You see this sometimes at memorial services. I remember officiating at the service for Hank Meyermann some years back. The rows reserved for “family” overflowed - the entourage surrounding mother Marge. Sons-in-law. Former sons-in-law. Employees. Former employees. Friends that just seemed to belong up there with them. Marge, seemingly by accident, collected people. They were a found family.

And so, in the middle of this story told primarily to justify the inclusion of these strange elements, the Moabites, we have this heartfelt story of a found family. The family you recognize and will not give up. Here is hope, also. When you despair over losing or perhaps never having your biological mother, when your children leave you however they do, there is an endless supply of mothers if you recognize them. There are always children that need a little mothering.

A third reason Ruth may have chosen Naomi, and this actually makes the most sense to me, is that Naomi has revealed something of her real self to her. She has gone beyond her cultural role and is somehow personal. This is risky in life, and a little weird, biblically speaking.

The story ends up okay. After the two women settle in Bethlehem, they scheme to capture a new husband for Ruth, a man named Boaz. Naomi tells Ruth to enter his tent at night, uncover his feet, and lay at the foot of the bed. I feel pretty safe in assuming that this is the tame version of her instructions. We are probably not told the real methodology. Boaz, we read, may be a bit long in the tooth, but he could, forgive me, pick up a hint. But even here, he can’t help

noticing Ruth's kindness. "Because you have been so kind to your mother-in-law," he says, this is why he chooses her and eventually proposes to her. The story ends with Ruth marrying Boaz, having sons, William and Harry, (this may not be their real names) and the lineage goes on. We are back on safe and familiar biblical ground.

But the "safe" part of the story is not the moving part. It is not the part we remember. That comes much earlier in the difficult choice that Ruth makes to follow Naomi. I think Ruth makes this choice because Naomi has shared something of her real self with her. She has offered her the gift of knowing who she really is.

When I first came to this church, I taught a small class on the writing of ethical wills. An ethical will is a letter written for future generations. It could tell the story of your life. It could just outline the principles that you tried to live by, the values which you would like to pass on to your children and grandchildren. You could write an ethical will to be shared with nieces and nephews, or children that may have come to make up your chosen family. Some of you have written ethical wills and shared them with me. I loved reading these. I would give anything to have such a letter from my own mother. I *am* grateful she taught me silly songs – like "Three Little Fishies" and "Mairsy Doats". (I didn't know at the time that these were the popular songs from her adolescence in the late '30s. A tiny hint of who she was.)

And this is my message to you moms, or to anyone who has a young person in your life. Get down in words something of your life story. Why did you say and do what you said and did? When were you the happiest in your life? What did you love? What were the hard choices you had to make? How did you cope with your losses? What were your values? What were your mistakes? Who were you?

Moms, we may THINK it's all about us, and early on it is. But later, and especially after you're gone, it's also about you. So in our time with you, we need to know who you are. Whatever you tell us helps us know who we are, too.

I never met Bernice, Robert's mother. She died seven years before I met him. But I know something of her story because she shared so much of it with Robert. We would have certainly disappointed her – we are now past the age of giving her her dearest wish. It would have broken her heart, I'm sure, and it's a little sad to think about. In the tape she made, she gave me something wonderful – a chance to know her, even a little. That's all we really want. Happy Mother's Day, everyone.