

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Pentecost 21 (Proper 23), Series C
Saturday, October 12, 2013
Sunday, October 13, 2013

Sermon: “Call Me Bitter”

Text: Ruth 1:1-22¹

Focus: The Lord Jesus is our Redeemer.

Function: That they would remain hopeful and faithful in the midst of hard, bitter circumstances.

Structure: Four Pages (Law-then-Gospel)

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me... not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Trouble in the Text

“Call me Bitter.” For that is what the name Mara means. That’s what Naomi says in the verses following our Old Testament lesson: “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (Ruth 1:20-21, ESV).² “Call me Bitter,” Naomi said, for she was a broken and bitter woman. She was broken-hearted, and she was flat-out broke. As a childless widow, she was completely destitute. In the ancient world, women depended on men for provision and security. There were no food banks, retirement accounts, or social security. A woman without a father, husband, or son had no one to count on, few legal rights, and very little protection. A woman without a man was a woman without hope. Naomi said to Orpah and Ruth, “No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the LORD has gone out against me” (1:13).

¹ The Old Testament pericope is Ruth 1:1-19a, but 1:19b-22 must be included for better context.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Ruth and Naomi lived at a terrible time in Israel's history, the time of the judges, when "there was no king in Israel" and "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Jdg. 17:6). Everyone did what was right in their own eyes! How awful! Can you imagine the chaos and terror that multiplied in such anarchy? Then, to make matters worse, there was a famine—no food!

So Naomi and her family went to live among their enemies in Moab, where, at least, there was a little to eat. You see, there was no bread in Bethlehem, the so-called "House of Bread." Then Naomi's husband died, leaving her with two sons. Her sons married Moabite women, which was forbidden under Jewish Law (Deut. 23:3-4). As if to make matters worse, neither of her daughter-in-laws were able to conceive. Was this punishment for their intermarriage? We cannot be sure. But after 10 years, both of Naomi's sons died without leaving behind any children. Elimelech's family line seemed at an end, and so was Naomi's hope.

That's why she urged her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers' homes. What use was it going back to Bethlehem? Why should they throw in their lot with Naomi, a woman seemingly cursed by God? Naomi insisted, "The hand of the LORD has gone out against me" (Ruth 1:13). Naomi believed God was against her—that the Lord had become her enemy. "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara..." (1:20). Call me Bitter.

Trouble in the World

And what should we call *you*? What is your name? Is it Bitter? Do you rue the dawn and curse the day of your birth (cp. Job 3)? Are you losing hope? Do you believe that God is against you, and the Lord has become your enemy?

Even if you yourself are not embittered against God, chances are that you know someone who is. People get angry at God about all kinds of things: cancer, the untimely death of a loved one, dysfunctional families, losing your job or home, bankruptcy, prayers that go unanswered, disappointment, and even church abuse. And then there's guilt. Unconfessed sin leads to guilt, which hardens our hearts, makes us afraid, and embitters us against the Lord.

It's easy to blame God for the pain we suffer. After all, can't the Almighty do something about it? Yes, of course! Then why doesn't he?! I don't know. I'm not here to solve the problem of pain or give a neat, pat answer to human suffering. That would be theodicy—an arrogant exercise in futility. Ultimately, we suffer because there is sin in the world—our sin and other people's sin (Genesis 3 and Romans 8). But that's no reason to blame God and become bitter.

Bitterness is toxic to the soul. Bitterness leads to death. Bitterness is a poison that destroys faith, ruins relationships, and kills your spirit. That's why the Bible says, "See to it that... no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled" (Heb. 12:15), and in another place, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice" (Eph. 4:31).

Grace in the Text

Even when life was at its worst, Naomi didn't lose faith. She still prayed and called upon the name of the LORD to bless others. The very God she deemed her enemy she also believed was the only way out of her situation. Yes, she held the Lord responsible for her suffering, but that means she also believed he alone could relieve her. "For she had heard in the fields of Moab that the LORD had visited his people and given them food" (Ruth 1:6).

So she went back home to Bethlehem, and her devoted daughter-in-law Ruth insisted on going with her:

“Ruth said, ‘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...’” (Ruth 1:16-17).

God was about to reverse her fortune and revive her hope—*through Ruth!*

For in Bethlehem, a good and godly man named Boaz took notice of Ruth. (By the way, what kind of man was Boaz before he got married? He was ruthless. Get it? Ruth-less?!) He showed Ruth kindness, gave her food and protection, and took her under his wing. Boaz was no Bozo. Overwhelmed by his generosity, Naomi dared to hope again. “May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!” (Ruth 2:20).

Naomi and Ruth hatched a plan, and in a desperate, daring move, Ruth proposed marriage to Boaz! After attending to a few legal matters, he accepted. He acted in Naomi’s behalf to buy her bankrupt farm and marry Ruth in order to provide an heir for the line of Elimelech. In this way, he acted as a *kinsman-redeemer* (Hebrew: *go’el*), a close male relative who bails you out of bankruptcy and saves you from selling yourself into slavery.

By story’s end, Boaz and Ruth are married. (Boaz was no longer Ruth-less!) Ruth gives birth to a son. Naomi’s grandson is the apple of her eye, and joy returns to her life.

The women of Bethlehem are quick to point out that all of this is an amazing miracle of God’s grace:

“Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law [Ruth] who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him” (Ruth 4:14-15).

You see, God was not Naomi’s enemy. He was never against her. He was always *for* her and *with* her. By story’s end, he made good and gave her bread, a baby, and a kinsman-redeemer.

Grace in the World

“The LORD be with you!” (Ruth 2:4). Actually, the Lord *is* with you—and *for* you. He promises to be (Matthew 28:20). God is in it for the long haul. God is our forever Father and faithful Friend. “If we are faithless, he remains *faithful*” (2 Tim. 2:13). And he has a good and perfect plan for your life. “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (Jer. 29:11, NIV).

There is no reason to be angry and bitter against God. He loves you and cares for you. Even if your hope seems dead right now, don’t give up! It will all work out in the end, just as it did for Naomi and Ruth. The apostle Paul assures us: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Notice that the Bible doesn’t say the cliché, “Everything will work out in the end.” That’s not true for the unbeliever. We know that all things work together for God “for those who love God,” for those who believe and trust in his Son, Jesus Christ. So wait and see the way your story turns out! God gives bread and babies. He always gives good gifts to his children (Matt. 7:11; Jas. 1:17).

And the greatest gift of all is *God’s* baby, his Son Jesus. We also have a Redeemer who was born to a woman with a bitter name: a little virgin named Mary. Mary, Maria, Miriam, Mara—they are all the same, and they all mean “bitter.” The Virgin Mary was a sweet girl with a bitter name who gave birth to God’s Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is our Redeemer. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13). No matter how bitter your circumstances or how hardened your heart has become, you can be free of the curse and sting of the law. Because Jesus drank the bitter gall of the Law and poured out his blood on the cross,

your sins are forgiven, and hope is alive! Christ was faithful to the bitter end, so you don't have to be bitter anymore.

So we echo the *Benedictus* of Bethlehem: "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer..." (Ruth 4:14). Neither has the Lord left *you* without a redeemer. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of David. A descendant of Ruth and Boaz, through Ruth's line comes our kinsman-redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ (Ruth 4:18-22; Matt. 1:1-17). He is our brother in the flesh, the Son of God *and* Son of Man! But our Redeemer did more than just bail you out of bankruptcy or provide you with an heir. He bought us back "from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death" (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed). He gives us an eternal inheritance—a home in heaven. And he gives us himself, the Bread of Life, to feed our faith and give us hope.

Let me close with a bit of verse to take away our bitterness and give us hope (*Sing*):

*There is a Redeemer,
Jesus, God's own Son,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Holy One.
Thank You, oh, my Father,
For giving us Your Son,
And leaving Your Spirit
'Til the work on earth is done.*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.