

SERMON TITLE: "Stressed Out by Relationships? God Can Help!"  
SERMON TEXT: Ruth 1:1-22  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: September 18, 2016, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

Last Sunday we began a series of sermons called, "Stressed Out? God Can Help!" In that first message, we talked about how God can help us with our activity stress. Today, we're going to talk about how God can help us with our relationship stress.

One of the greatest sources of anxiety and stress for all of us comes in and through our relationships. If we aren't worrying about the troubles our family members and friends are going through, we're worrying about the character and quality of our own relationships with those persons. Does he care about me? Do I love her? How can we be closer? How can we get along? Would we be better off apart? Can my wounded heart ever trust and love again?

### **1—THE STORY**

To address some of our relationship stress, I want us to think today about the story of Ruth found in the Old Testament. What Lucki read to us is just the beginning, so let's review the whole story. As chapter one indicated, there was a famine in Judah, so Naomi, her husband, and their two sons moved from Bethlehem to the land of Moab. There, Naomi's husband died. Her sons grew to adulthood and married Moabite women. Then Naomi's sons also died, and a famine struck Moab. Naomi heard that food was available in Judah, so she decided to move back there to her home country. Naomi advised her daughters-in-law to return to their Moabite families and marry again. Orpah took that advice, but Ruth declared her commitment to stay with Naomi and accept the new people and God of Naomi's native land.

While it was good for mother Naomi to return home, she was, at first, overcome by grief and bitterness. And life there wasn't easy for the two women. Fortunately, though, by Jewish law,

landowners were supposed to allow poor people to come into the fields to scavenge any grain or produce left behind by the harvesters. So, while Naomi made a home for them in town, Ruth went out to the fields to glean barley. Ruth found her way to some fields owned by Boaz, who happened to be a relative of her deceased husband. Seeing her there, Boaz acted kindly toward her. He told his harvesters not to mistreat her in any way and to purposely leave extra grain behind for her to pick up. Boaz also invited Ruth to join him and his servants at mealtimes.

This relationship continued throughout the barley and wheat harvests. Then, because Boaz treated Ruth so well, but took no further steps to secure the women's future, mother-in-law Naomi decided it was time to move the relationship to the next level. So she advised Ruth to go to Boaz at night, to uncover his "feet," and lay next to him. Maybe you can pick up on the double meaning the original Hebrew language conveyed. The strategy worked. The next day, Boaz met with the elders in the town council and made a business transaction that allowed him to take Ruth as his wife. They were married, had a baby son, and gave Naomi the grandchild she'd always wanted. Naomi didn't know that future, of course, but she did know that her current hardships and grief had finally turned to joy.

## **2—POINTS OF STRESS**

Most of us like stories with happy endings. But a good story doesn't rush to happily ever after. A good story has many twists and turns and points of stress along the way. This biblical story is full of all kinds of relationship stress. I've made a list to name off to you quickly. See if any of these kinds of relationship stress affect you:

- The stress of living far away from your family of origin.
- The stress of immigration.
- The stress of a cross-cultural or multi-religion family.
- The stress of death, separation, and grief.
- The stress of caring for older family members.
- The stress of potential harassment by co-workers.
- The stress of trying to secure your children's future.
- The stress of dating—putting yourself out there.

- The stress of deciding if, when, and how sexual relationships are appropriate.
- The stress of business and political dealings.
- The stress of committing to marriage.
- The stress of giving birth and caring for a baby.

As you read this story, you may be able to think of even more kinds of relationship stress experienced in this story of Ruth. But what I want you to think about mostly is that, whatever kind of relationship stress *you* are experiencing, God can help!

### **3—GOD CAN HELP IN FOUR WAYS**

In this story of Ruth I see four ways that God can help with our relationship stress. The first is that ***God can help by feeling our pain***. The Bible is full of stories of relationship stress. Many of those stories are much more coarse, violent, agonized, and desperate than this one. We often wonder why a cherished holy book would contain the curses and degradation that we find in the Bible. But I believe those stories are there because the people of God have learned over time that God cares about all our relationship stress. God doesn't just love the nice people who treat each other well or those who live in a protective bubble. God loves everyone all the time. When our relationships cause us worry, grief, and depression, God is right there with us. Even if our relationships are messy, complicated, and traumatic, God can help because God feels the real pain of real people.

A second way ***God can help*** with relationship stress is ***by understanding and forgiving our outbursts***. You may have noticed in chapter 1, verses 20 and 21, Naomi spoke out of the depths of her grief. Her stress was at an all-time high when she blamed God by saying, "The Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty . . . The Lord has dealt harshly with me and brought calamity upon me."

That was Naomi speaking her feelings freely about a God that she knew and trusted. We see the same kind of emotional outbursts in the Psalms, where the songwriter blames God for the attacks of

enemies. Even Jesus on the cross quoted Psalm 22, saying, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Not everyone in our circle of relationships can take or forgive that kind of blaming. Many a family member or friend might begin to distance themselves if we spoke to them like that. But God has big-enough shoulders, has long-enough staying power, and can see far-enough into the future to understand when our outbursts are related to particular circumstances and particular emotions that will pass in time. If you need to blow off some steam about your relationship stress, go ahead. Tell God how you feel. God can help by understanding and forgiving our outbursts.

A third way **God can help** with relationship stress is **by promising us a better day ahead**. Just like the Bible is full of stories of people dealing with all kinds of ugly or difficult relationship stress, the Bible is also full of God turning those awkward situations into good. This book of Ruth tells us not only that a cross-cultural marriage finally brought to Naomi a grandson who made her happy. It also tells that her grandson later became the grandfather of the great King David.

The final verses of the book of Ruth tell us that the good man Boaz was the great, great grandson of Perez. A different biblical story informs us that Perez was born from an incestuous relationship. Of course, God never wants us to involve ourselves unnecessarily in bad relationships, and God certainly does not condone abuse of any kind. But if we find ourselves or our loved ones already the victims of such unhealthy relationships, we shouldn't give up hope that a better life is possible. In fact, it may be that very hope that gives us the courage to break free from abuse and dysfunction, and take steps toward a healthier future. When we are facing relationship stress, God can help by promising us a better day ahead.

The fourth way **God can help** is **by providing a caring community**. There are a lot of people who aren't trustworthy, and we have to learn to watch out for them. This story makes clear reference to the harm that could have come to the young immigrant woman Ruth, while she was out working in the

fields. But the women of Bethlehem who gathered around Naomi show clearly that there are also some very good people who welcome, encourage, and bless us. Boaz obviously shows that there are kind and generous people who look out for our needs and protect us from harm. The town council of elders is a reminder that we too have governing bodies which provide the means to ensure our well-being in official codes of community custom and procedure. In other words, God does provide good people who are worthy of our trust.

Once hurt by a bad relationship or a good relationship that ended badly, it's easy to withdraw and hold back. It's hard to accept the help and love that others can give, because we don't want to be hurt again. Getting involved with other people may also be hard if we suspect that the others might want us to abide by their rules or make some changes in our behaviors. But the way to healing and hope isn't through isolation. The best way to find a life-giving future is by carefully and thoughtfully entering into relationships again. God encourages us—God can help us—by providing a caring community.

### **CONCLUSION**

Our church had both a memorial service and a wedding this week. For better or for worse, weddings and funerals are two times in life when relationships are most poignant. Fortunately, both this week's events went very smoothly. But my long experience as a pastor informs me that, even in the strongest families, there are considerable anxieties and concerns when the relatives and their associates get together. Our combined hopes and dreams for the future, disappointments and pain from the past, and uncertainty about the present concern all of us to some degree or another. No matter who we are, we have some kind of relationship stress. That's the bad news. The good news is that we don't have to manage this all by ourselves. By feeling our pain with us, by understanding and forgiving our outbursts, by promising us a better day ahead, and by providing a caring community—God can ease our interpersonal troubles. So, if you're feeling stressed out by relationships, remember: God can help!