

Pass the Tissues

Stanton Reformed Church

September 29, 2019

Focus: Ruth's companionship to Naomi was a show of comfort.

Function: Companionship is comfort and part of our work toward those who mourn.

Do/Think: Be a companion.

I began a new novel this week, *Leaving Time* by Jodi Picoult. It's about a woman who studied elephants. Or it's about a daughter who is grieving her mother. Or maybe it's about a psychic who was hired by the daughter to help find her mother...

I'm only $\frac{1}{3}$ of the way through so I'm still figuring it out.

But I learned a new word this week - allomothering. It's the term that describes how babies are brought up in elephant herds.

Allomothering - it's a fancy word that means "it takes a village."

Here's a paragraph from the book, "like everything else, there is a biological reason to allow [others] to help you parent: when you have to eat 150 kilograms of food a day and you have a baby that loves to explore, you

can't run after him and get all the nutrition you need to make milk for him.

“Allomothering also allows young cows to learn how to take care of a baby, how to protect a baby, how to give a baby the time and space it needs to explore without putting it in danger.

“So theoretically you could say an elephant has many mothers...”

I learned something else too - apparently elephants experience many of the same emotions that we do; elephants are capable of sadness, joy, love, jealousy, fury, compassion, distress and even grief.

Elephants grieve.

The herd will take great care in the burial of the dead by putting leaves and twigs over the body.

When a herd encounters the skeleton of a dead elephant, they often will roll them under their feet, in a meditative way.

Even years later, elephants have been observed revisiting the site where one of their herd or family had died. They'll stay there for days at a time, grieving their loss.

The matriarch tells the herd when it's time to comfort one another, when it's time to linger, when it's time to protect, when it's time to move on.

And that brings me to our story for today.

The scene is set in a famine. A mother has lost her husband and both of her sons and now is left with her daughters in law.

The mother decides it's time to move on. She is going to return to her homeland and she tells her daughters to do the same.

One daughter takes her advice; the other does not.

It's a lovely story of a non-traditional family. But there is more going on here.

Each of the character's names mean something in Hebrew, the original language of the text.

I have no real good reason for why translators don't translate words like this but instead transliterate it - sound it the Hebrew word into English.

Hebrew names are typically common nouns.

For example, imagine if we were reading a story and all the characters had intriguing names like Hope, Serenity, Faith, or if one of them was named was Ruckus?

We would read that story differently... we would read it allegorically and not literally.

So Hebrew names have common meaning. For example, Naomi, the matriarch in this story, the word Naomi is the word pleasant in Hebrew.

So listen to the story again -

There was a woman named Pleasant. She had two sons. Their names were sickness and consumption.

I'm not kidding.

And Pleasant was married to the “reign of God.”

The reign of God, Pleasant, sickness and consumption fled from the house of bread because there was a famine in the land.

And it came to pass that the reign of God died.

Should I pause for us to consider what the author might be trying to say by having the reign of God die?

It seems the writer wants us to know that the people believed God had left them; they were unprotected and uncared for.

Pleasant's two sons took wives: one whose name sounds suspiciously like the word companion. The other suspiciously like the word for the back of one's neck.

They lived together for 10 years and finally sickness and consumption died. So Pleasant was left with her two daughters in laws.

She tells them, Go back to your people. Leave me be. I'm going back to mine... and I

beg you, don't call me Pleasant anymore.
Call me Bitterness. For God has acted
wickedly to me.

What would you do? If you were one of the
daughters?

Well, the one sounds like the "back of the
neck" turned and went back to her family.

But the other, the character named
Companion – does not turn away.

She does sort of the unthinkable - she makes
a covenant with Bitterness and becomes her
companion.

Companion understands. Companion
understands how Pleasant became
Bitterness.

Companion understands that Bitterness bore
and then lost sickness and consumption.
Companion understands that Bitterness has
lived without the reign of God, and now they
are facing a famine.

Companion knows. Companion stays.

The etymology of the word companion comes to us from the French meaning “bread fellow.”

A companion is one who breaks bread with.
A mate, a fellow, a partner.

It says that Bitterness and Companion
“walked the journey of return” to the land
known as “Praise.”

I like the phrase “journey of return.”

Journey is a word that has forward
movement. But they are journeying to return
which sounds like they are looking back as
part of their journey.

Grief is a journey of return.

Grieving has forward movement to it. But in
order to grieve in a healthy way, grief
requires looking back.

And the thing we know about grief is - none
of us grieve the same way.

I have developed several close friends who
are widows of varying ages. And they have
given me the single most precious gift - they

have given me freedom to make my journey of return in my own unique way. And they have promised to be my companion.

It takes a lot of courage to find next steps when you have lost someone who has been formidable in your life.

For me, a husband of 21 years is formidable.

For you, losing a pastor to cancer and having her husband move to Michigan - even if it was the absolute right thing, the expected thing - is a massive loss, of not one, but two formidable people in your lives.

And none of you grieve the same.

You are all taking steps and all of your steps are unique to you.

You are all looking back and all of your memories are unique to you.

None of you are grieving the same way but make no mistake, all of you are grieving.

Some of you are quite aware of your grief.

Some of you are still in shock. You may not even remember this season of life together.

Some of you cannot make it through Sunday worship without crying.

Some of you are ready to move on and perhaps even wish we would stop talking about it.

Some of you feel comfortable moving forward and others feel tremendously guilty.

Some of you find yourself angry at things here at church or at home or at work... and it may be uncomfortable to admit but anger is part of grief.

Here's where it gets really complex.

Some of you are grieving other things.

For some of you Becky's death has kicked up all kinds of other concerns - worries about safety in life, about who and where God is or was.

For some of you Becky's cancer has reminded you of someone else who had cancer.

Some of you are grieving Phil's move more than Becky's death.

For some of you Phil's move has reminded you of other losses in your life, other times when other formidable people left.

Grieving as a community is complex. It's rife with landmines. It's confusing. It's painful.

Loss is around us in many ways. Loss is unavoidable. Loss is universal.

Jesus knew that - it's why he included grief, mourning in the Beattitudes.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

Blessed, happy, content are the ones who go the journey of return... they will be comforted.

What does comfort look like?

I believe comfort looks like companionship.

I believe comfort looks like allomothering. I believe we see comfort at work when our village is by our side.

I believe comfort is what happens when we make a journey of return together.

I believe you have already begun to make this journey of return together. You are already in many ways companions to one another.

And I count it an honor, a gift even to make this journey of return with you.

From what I have seen already here at Stanton, Jesus was right in saying that blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted.

When mourning is met with comfort, we are blessed, we find happiness. We find contentment.

Let us continue to find courage enough to make the journey of return together.