

Ruth 1:1-19a

"If God is for us," declares the apostle, "who can be against us?" But what if God is not for us, but is actually against us? For Naomi, it appears this way. While in a strange land, the land of Moab, God first takes her husband in death, then He takes her two sons. She has nothing left. No property, no means of support, no one to care for her, no one to love her. She is broken, defeated, and she is bitter. Could it be that God is punishing her; that He is not for her at all, but is against her?

Have you ever felt this way? Wondering why everything that could go wrong does go wrong? "Perhaps God is against me. Even if He is not, He must not care that much for me." If you can relate to Naomi, a little or a lot, there is good news for you. God is not against you. He is for you, and He is here with you. The story of Naomi underscores this truth for you. She learns, as do all of God's dear children, that at times the way God works to show His mercy and love is to allow us to become broken and defeated, even bitter, so that His grace is even more pronounced in our lives.

For Naomi, His grace and mercy are seen in her daughter-in-law, Ruth. There is no reason for Ruth to stay with Naomi. She is an aging woman. She has no more sons for Ruth to marry, nor will she. Naomi will return to Judah alone and in shame. *"The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord."* Naomi, however, is not feeling very blessed. Cursed yes, but not blessed.

But God changes all that, and He uses Ruth to do it. At first Naomi refuses to allow Ruth to go with her. "Why would you want to stay with me? I have nothing for you. Stay in Moab and find a husband there." But Ruth will not leave her. She clings to Naomi, for this is of God. God is loving Naomi through Ruth. And her words to her express this truth: *"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. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."* Beautiful...simply beautiful.

Do you have a Ruth in your life? Someone who is loyal and truly cares for you? Who places your needs ahead of their own? Someone who loves you unconditionally? Yes, my friend, you do. Your Ruth is Jesus.

Now this may seem strange to us, even backwards. We might think it's the other way around...that Jesus is Naomi and we are Ruth. After all, we are the ones who are supposed to cling to Him. And before God's altar on our Confirmation Day, we made an oath, like Ruth did to Naomi, to stay with Jesus no matter what, even unto death.

Well how's that going? Not very well? We're not a very good Ruth. We can easily make such a promise as she did, but we have a lot of trouble keeping it. Well no wonder, because we are not Ruth. We are Naomi. Jesus is your Ruth.

The promise He made to you is in your baptism. We heard His beautiful words this morning as Jack became His dear adopted child. Every promise of God is joined to Holy Baptism, including the promise of Ruth to Naomi, *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you...May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you."*

And death did indeed part Jesus from us. But it was only temporary. And it had to be this way, for Jesus became the one cursed by God on the cross. He bore your sin there, and so there He endured your punishment. But He rose from the dead, and now He is with you always even unto the end of the world.

There was no reason for Ruth to stay with Naomi. And there is no reason for Jesus to stay with us. Like Naomi, we have nothing for Him. Except our sinful heart and sin-filled past. And these He takes to be His burden to carry. Jesus is not abhorred by what you have done. He forgives it all.

Sometimes we struggle with this. Naomi tried to push Ruth away. I guess she wanted to have a pity-party alone. And perhaps she felt worthless. Ruth loved her, but Naomi felt unlovable. "Go love a husband; not me."

Sometimes we push Jesus away. When everything goes wrong, we may feel unloved by God. When we sin the same sin over and over, we may wonder how He could forgive us...again. "Maybe Jesus will wash His hands of me and go His separate way now." No, friend. He washed you in the waters of your baptism. He promised to abide with you, and He never breaks a promise. His love for you is unconditional. What you do, and how you live – good or awful – does not, cannot stop Him from loving you. And no matter how often you have done the same sin, as awful as it was, Jesus forgives you. He does not pick and choose who to forgive. He forgives all of you because He died for all of you.

Ruth went back with Naomi to the land of Judah, and Naomi became blessed in every way. God led Ruth to Boaz, and they gave Naomi a little grandson to hold and to love; a little boy who would become King David's grandpa. And through David, Jesus would be born. It doesn't get any better than this. Naomi's bitter life turned into a joyous life, and it's because of Ruth.

And also for you. Wherever you are in life, your Ruth is with you. And because He is, you are blessed, even if you don't feel blessed. In Jesus you have the love of God for you. You have all of His gracious promises to you. You have God's forgiveness in Jesus. And you have your Ruth who stays with you in this life to carry you into the life to come. It simply doesn't get any better than this. All is well, my fellow Naomi. Jesus, your Ruth, is here with you and for you. Amen.