

## **Don't Call Me Mom, Call Me Mara**

Today is Mother's Day and God bless each and every one of you ladies on this special day. Every one of us has a mother. Some are still with us and others have made it home to heaven, but every one of us owe so much to our mothers, starting with our very life. We wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for our mothers giving us life. And then of course, we have learned so much about life and living from our mothers. I ran across some things we learn from our moms this week I thought you might appreciate.

Mothers teach us about foresight: 'Make sure you wear clean underwear in case you have to go to the hospital.'

Mothers teach us about maturity: 'Eat your vegetables or you'll never grow up.'

Mothers teach us about logic: 'If you fall out of that tree and break your neck, don't come crying to me!'

Mothers teach us about prayer: 'Young man you better pray that comes out of the carpet.'

Mothers teach us about time travel: 'If you don't straighten up I'm going to knock you into the middle of next week.'

Mothers teach us about contradictions: 'Shut your mouth and eat your dinner.'

Mothers teach us about contortionism: 'Would you look at the dirt on the back of your neck?'

Mothers teach us about perseverance: 'You are going to sit there until you eat every last bite of that broccoli.'

Mothers teach us about the weather: 'It looks like a tornado hit your room.'

Mothers teach us about genetics: 'You are just like your father' or 'when you grow up I hope you have a child just like you.'

Well, that's just a few things mothers teach us. This morning I want to look at a mother in the Old Testament. This isn't a message for perfect mothers. This isn't a message for moms that have never had a heartbreak. This isn't a message for ladies with perfect husbands and perfect children, but if you've struggled and wondered if you made all the right choices, if you're a mom that feels like life has been unfair or perhaps even that God has let you down somewhere along the way, then this message is for you. If you're a mom that understands pain and loss, then this message is for you. You probably don't recognize the name Mara from the Old Testament, but you might recognize the name Naomi.

Turn with me to the book of Ruth. That's where you'll find the story of Naomi and her daughter in law, Ruth. The book of Ruth is only four chapters long and you can read the whole story in five or ten minutes. I want to just remind you of a bit of the story and then make a few observations that I feel the Lord wants me to make on this Mother's Day, 2011.

The opening verses set the stage for us. **“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Killion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.” Ruth 1:1-2**

We get a glimpse of the political and economic circumstances in which Naomi married and started a family. It was not an easy time. The bible says, “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” It was a time of political turmoil and unrest. It was a time when the moral standards were deteriorating – everyone did what was right in their own eyes. It was a dangerous and wicked time.

You might think the world is too evil to be marrying and bringing children into it, but it has always been that way. Naomi and her husband knew how wicked the world was, but they were like every young couple, hopeful and excited as they started out their life together. Everything was going right for them. Even their names reflected something of their hopeful outlook towards the future. Elimelech means “my God is king” and Naomi means “pleasant, delightful, lovely.” They seemed to be the perfect couple. Life was good for the first few years of marriage.

But things began to change. Famine began to take its toll. The crops failed and work was hard to find. What an irony, that their home town, Bethlehem, means “house of bread,” but there was no bread to be found. In the midst of this difficult time, their two sons were born. Perhaps reflecting the darkness of the circumstances, or maybe they just liked the names, but they named their first son Mahlon, which means “weak or sickly” and their second son Killion, which means “pining or consumptive.” Not exactly hopeful sounding anymore.

Life didn't seem very fair to this mother of two. Husband out of work, poverty was crippling them, the children were hungry and sick, so they pack up their belongings and take their two sick children and head to Moab, modern day Jordan.

Maybe some of you moms know what that is like – having to relocate during really difficult economic times. The babies are sick, your husband is depressed and just generally in a bad mood because he can't find a job and can't provide for his family. Here is your patron saint: Naomi is a mom who knows what you are going through.

Taking the family to Moab may not have been the best idea. You can read about how Moab seduced Israel to immorality and to worship idols in Numbers 23-25 and Deuteronomy 23:2 forbids any Moabite or his descendants from entering the assembly of the Lord to the tenth generation. This ban had lasted until Naomi's time, so it may not have been wise to go to Moab. Imagine the fear in Naomi's heart, that her sons might do the very thing that got Israel in trouble in Numbers 23 - marry Moabite women and worship their gods. But Naomi and Elimelech didn't know what else to do. They were desperate to feed their children and provide for their family.

Going to Moab might not have been the wisest thing to do, but at least they had food to eat. Things might have been looking up for Naomi but then Elimelech died. Now a widow with two sons, Naomi raises them on her own. The boys meet and marry Moabite women - Orpah and Ruth and then, after about ten years in Moab, both sons die. The bible sadly states, **“Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.”**

Word comes that the famine has ended in Judah and Naomi prepares to return home to Bethlehem. It's interesting that her daughters in law prepare to move with her. She tells them to go back home to their mother's house. Listen to the love and the sadness in her words. (Read Ruth 1:11-13)

Orpah returns home but Ruth refuses to leave and goes to Bethlehem with Naomi. Look at verse 19. The whole town (at that time Bethlehem may have only been a village of a few hundred people) re-acted to Naomi's return. The response may have been because Ruth, a Moabite woman was in their town. But perhaps it was shock at the toll life had taken on this once pleasant, vibrant, lovely woman, Naomi. **“Can this be Naomi?”** the women asked. I don't think they were saying this as a complement. And look at her response.

**“Don't call me Naomi,” she told them. “Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon**

**me.”** Don’t call me Naomi - pleasant...call me Mara, which means bitter.

Perhaps you can understand Naomi and her response. She had lost so much. “I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.” Too much death and sadness and grief. Too many goodbyes had drained the color from her cheeks. Three funerals had drawn the life from her soul. Maybe she had made some poor choices. I’m sure she had regrets. Maybe she shouldn’t have gone to Moab in the first place, I don’t know. But now Naomi was making an even greater mistake. Naomi believed that God was against her.

Can you relate to Naomi? You’ve lost too much. You went away full and came back empty. You just feel like throwing in the towel, just giving up on God and on life. “I tried to do the right thing and look where it got me.”

Maybe you feel like Naomi, like changing your name. Don’t call me Naomi. Don’t call me mother. Just call me Mara, because everything in life has become bitter and empty and messed up. Everything good has been taken away from me. Maybe it hasn’t been death like Naomi, but maybe it was divorce that brought loss to you. Your husband is gone and your kids aren’t around much. You understand how Naomi is feeling. Unloved. Uncared for. You start thinking maybe God is against me after all, but don’t give up just yet. Naomi’s story isn’t over yet and neither is yours!

Naomi still has one thing going for and that is Ruth. In fact, Naomi can’t be all bad because her daughter in law sure did love her. They get settled in Bethlehem and Ruth tells Naomi she wants to go out into the fields and try to gather up some of the grain that is left behind in the fields so they will have bread to eat (2:2). God had instructed the harvesters to leave some grain in the fields so the poor would have grain for bread.

Look quickly at the story that unfolds in chapter 2. Boaz was a relative of Elimelech and it was his field in which Ruth found herself. Ruth had asked permission of the foreman to gather grain behind his workers.

Notice in verse 7 that the foreman was impressed with her work ethic.

Notice Boaz’s response in verses 8-12. He gave her food to eat and sent her home with grain and food for Naomi.

Notice verses 19-20 as Naomi finds out who Ruth’s benefactor is and in the following verses begins to see the possibility for a budding romance for Ruth and Boaz.

I'll let you lovers of a good romance story read chapters 3 and 4 on your own to see the events that led Ruth and Boaz to the altar, but let me just point out a couple of things Naomi did that are so important for us to consider this morning.

Although Naomi had allowed bitterness to settle in and she had mistakenly believed that God had lifted his hand against her and brought all these bad things upon her, **Naomi refused to remain in bitterness.**

When Ruth tells Naomi that it was a man named Boaz who had shown such kindness to them, her response was to bless the Lord. Reading the passage it's hard to determine whether she is referring to Boaz or to the Lord when she says, **"He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living and the dead."** Ultimately, I think Naomi recognizes that it is all the same thing. The kindness of Boaz is the kindness and provision of the Lord being extended to her and to Ruth. Bless the Lord for he has not stopped showing his kindness to the living. Naomi refused to remain in bitterness and instead renews her faith in God and in God's people.

You may have been wounded by life and the unfairness of your circumstances, but let me assure you, God has not stopped showing his kindness to the living. He still has good things in store for you. There are still people who love you, who want to help you and show kindness to you, who won't betray you or let you down. God isn't finished with you yet so don't give up and don't let bitterness consume you.

Not only did Naomi refuse to remain in bitterness, **Naomi refused to be paralyzed by her losses and grief.** Disappointment and grief has a way of paralyzing us. Bad things happen, we are disappointed by others, angry at God, wanting to blame him for all the bad things, and we just become consumed by all this and we just shut down – paralyzed by our losses and our grief, our disappointments and pain. I think that's the way Naomi felt when she first came back to Bethlehem and told them to call her Mara. Moffatt's translation reads, "Call me Mara, for the Almighty has cruelly marred me." I think she just shut down, feeling like she was marred for life.

But now she recognizes that life should go on. **"One day Naomi her mother in law said to her, 'My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. Wash and perfume yourself**

**and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking..."**

The rest of the story is rated at least pg-13, but notice that Naomi is telling Ruth it's time to move on. "We aren't going to be paralyzed by the past and by our losses anymore. We aren't going to live in the past or the pain of the past. Maybe life has been unfair, but God has been faithful and we are going to move on and trust him."

Ruth takes Naomi's advice and before you know it, chapter 4 tells us Ruth and Boaz marry and Ruth gives birth to a son. Look at what the women of Bethlehem say to Naomi. **"Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."** Then Naomi took the child, laid him in her lap and cared for him. The women living there said, 'Naomi has a son.' And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David."

Naomi finds a new calling, late in her life – grandmother. But understand this isn't her grandson by blood. This is her grandson by redemption and mercy and grace. Notice what verse 16 says.

**She took the child - a decision to accept God's plan.** She could have said, "Good for you Ruth and Boaz, but this isn't my grandchild. My sons are dead. My chances are long gone." She could have remained in her bitterness and anger, but instead, she accepted God's plan, God's blessing, God's greater purpose in all things. It wasn't just about loving her boys and raising them, it was about loving and raising this boy as well.

**She laid him in her lap – a decision to love again.** Remember what Naomi had told Ruth and Orpah? "I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me – even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons – would you wait until they grew up? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!"

Naomi thought there was no hope for her. She thought she could never open her heart to love again. She couldn't risk being hurt again, bearing the pain again. She felt hopeless, but now, because she refused to stay bitter, she can love again. She took this little son of Boaz and

Ruth and opened her heart to love again.

**She cared for him – a decision to give again.** In spite of all the hard times, in spite of all the disappointments of life, this mother decided to keep on giving and loving and living. She decided that she still had something to offer, something to share. And so she cared for Ruth's little boy Obed. And this little boy grew up to have a son of his own named Jesse. And Jesse grew up and had a little boy named David - a little boy who grew up to be king.

All of this happened because a mother refused to give up when things got bad. It happened because a mother refused to give up on God, refused to remain bitter, refused to be paralyzed by grief or loss or disappointment, instead, she chose to live again, to forgive and move on. She chose to love again, to give again, to accept the fact that God has a redemptive plan for us, beyond what we can dream or imagine. She chose to come back home to Bethlehem, back to a place of healing and hope and peace.

If life has let you down, if you've grown bitter or become paralyzed by loss or grief, if you've been disappointed and feel like you can't risk living or loving or giving again, may I assure you God has a plan for you, just like he had for Naomi, and he wants to love you and help you and bring you back home again to a place of healing, hope, laughter and peace. I don't mean this place, Carbondale, but I mean to a place in his arms, in his heart, where he loves you back to life and health and peace. God isn't done with you. Don't give up on God or on life. Trust him. Surrender to him. Open your heart to him mom. Open your heart and accept God's plan in spite of the past. Open your heart and love again, give again, live again. Who knows, he might have an assignment for you, to care for and nurture the grandfather of a king.