

## **“We Can’t Go Alone”**

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Texts: Ecclesiastes 4: 9-12 and Ruth 1

One of life’s most essential lessons is that we are never meant to go alone. And yet, modern culture pushes us increasingly into lonely silos” write the authors from Sanctified Arts. Kayla Craig takes it further, “In a pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps culture, choosing communal life is both radical and deeply faithful.” Everyone knows that we are in a crisis of loneliness, a suicide epidemic, a society of radicalized violent offenders that we write off with “mental health issues” and continue to ignore the issues. The Surgeon General’s office, under Dr. Vivek Murthy, put out a whole report called, “Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The US Surgeon General’s Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community.” Loneliness is real. Isolation is leading to a variety of bad outcomes. Our whole society suffers. But some of the reasons for that loneliness are as old as time itself.

This week, we are pointed to the story of the book of Ruth. It is not a book we study much, and I don’t plan to go through a whole explanation of the whole

book. As an aside, both scriptures are often used in weddings, but it is important to note that these scriptures aren't inherently romantic or specific to romantic partnership. They are, though, stories of relationship, partnership, friendship, companionship and community. Kayla Craig writes, "Ruth, a Moabite woman, could have returned to her birth family after her husband's death, following the expected path." We often forget how much times have changed regarding marriage, property, death, divorce and other such events. It would have been common and expected for Ruth to go back to her birth family, rather than staying. Everyone would have expected it. It was the times. It was almost a rule.

Craig continues, "Naomi, overcome with loss and steeped in grief, initially pushes Ruth away. She even renames herself "Mara," meaning "bitter," reflecting her belief that her life has been marked by divine disfavor." We live in a death-denying culture – a culture in which grief is rarely processed to the depths it needs to be. Caught in our grief and loneliness, we do like Naomi did. We close in, close down, and shut people out. Or we wallow in our grief, never really dealing with it, and still, we end up lonely. Dr. Craig writes, "Sorrow can make us shrink into ourselves, believing that solitude is safer

than the vulnerability of connection.” It doesn’t take the death of a spouse for us to be this way. Any kind of sorrow can have this effect.

Instead of leaving, however, Ruth decides to choose a “radical commitment to her mother-in-law” (Craig), saying, “Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go.” This radical commitment may be more than you can give to someone, or more than they require, but the idea that Ruth would do the unexpected and make a choice other than what was prescribed is the radical part of this story. It is not what we choose but why we choose the way we do. Do we just go along with things, or do we choose what we will and will not do? Easier said than done sometimes, I know, but think about it. Is your life a product of your choices, or are your choices a product of something else?

You see, “Ruth’s choice wasn’t merely about devotion. It was the formation of a new family built not on blood but on *kinship*, on the daring belief that our lives are intertwined.” I invite you to look at the picture that is either on the front of your bulletin or on the screen. The picture is called “Binding Braids”. The artist tells us that it depicts a whimsical scene in which Ruth and Naomi face opposite directions but are connected by one long braid. The artist,

Nicolette Penaranda describes the importance of hair and braids in her life. She writes: “Our braids were our ancestors, our heritage, and our culture. Our designs were our creativity and individuality. Braids bind us in ways that go beyond the physical – we are forever entwined.” The authors of our materials ask us what binds us beyond the physical.

They go on to talk about church. Jan Edmiston summarizes the work of Dr. Robert Putnam who differentiates between “bonding” and “bridging.” She writes: “I believe that what makes The Church thrive is a culture of bridging – or connecting people who would not ordinarily know each other or spend time together.” In contrast, bonding is a social connection that occurs between people who are alike. I wonder about us here, in this place, do we more often build a bridge between people or do we just bond with people like us, or some of both?

The point is that recent studies show that 1 in 2 Americans struggles with social disconnection. “Feelings of isolation hurt our mental and physical health. Research has shown that loneliness can take the same toll on our bodies as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.” ***Cultivating compassionate community is the antidote.***

Here we go again. In a world full of big problems, what is ours to do? We know that we're better together. Ruth new deep down in her bones that we're better together and Naomi's grief doesn't deter her. Meanwhile, we forget that Ruth needed Naomi just as much as Naomi needed her. Both were alone and together they embarked on a journey to a new beginning. This is a beautiful picture of mutuality, which is deeply needed in our fractured world. It is difficult to create a small family or friend group that is mutually giving and receiving – let alone a whole church community. Our authors for this week ask us, “What would it look like to foster deep connections in this season (they were talking about the holiday season) -- not just gatherings marked by exchanging pleasantries but by sharing hour messy, holy, complicated life? You can't go alone. You weren't meant to.

Finally, they write, “In each other's companionship, may we find the reflection of the One who, in becoming flesh, chose to be with us, to share in our humanity, and to show us that we need each other.” We always have needed others, and we always will. And they need us, too. The task is to make those relationships mutual, where both people (or all people) truly share companionship.

Receive this blessing:

Beloved, you are not alone on this winding journey. May the companionship of fellow sojourners reflect the love of the One who—in becoming flesh—chose to journey alongside us. May the quilt of life warm you from the chill of isolation, and may the Spirit move you to compassion as you cultivate community, even in times of uncertainty.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.