

“Hope From The Unexpected”

By Edgar F. Solís

Introduction.

We humans are weird! Why is it we often want to extend our suffering? In our Old Testament reading today we can see that after all of the tragedies Naomi suffered, she wanted to be alone! Now I know that in the western culture the relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law is not the exemplary model of friendship and tenderness. In the Latino culture the most famous and favorite family villain is the mother-in-law who is almost as famous as the wicked stepmother in stories about dysfunctional families. This reminds me of a couple who was arguing and the wife said – “You hate my relatives!” The husband replied – “No I don’t! In fact, I like your mother-in-law more than I like mine!” Well as I said, when we are in trouble, we tend to complicate the situation. I wonder what happened to this husband after his reply. Yes, human relationships are hard especially when we don’t have God’s active presence working in our hearts.

From my perspective this is what happened in the Bible passage from Ruth. Here we have two women who have experienced pain, death, tragedy and loss. Their options are limited; their futures look grey and sad. The situation is bad mainly because they belong to a time and a place where the world was dominated by men. On one hand we have Naomi who according to the narrative was an older woman who suffered loss, despair, and hopelessness. According to Christian author Wilda C. Gafney, Naomi's character is depicted as a *post-menopausal woman, useless for her child-bearing years are long past*. On the other hand, we have Ruth; a young immigrant widow, a Moabite woman, probably taken to marriage by force (sexual abuse). In the words of Wilda C. Gafney "Ruth is marginalized, socially and sexually vulnerable." She could

represent all marginalized and abused women that belonged to the patriarchal and abusive societies of the world. So, here we have these two marginalized women, Naomi and Ruth. Their expectations are broken, their dreams have vanished and the future looks like a thunderstorm on the horizon. There is no other option but to return to their homeland. In Ruth, the Hebrew word Shub or return (“Go back” “Turn back” “brought back” etc.) occurs 15 times, 12 times in the first chapter. Even when “turn,” “return,” or turn back is used in a seemingly geographical sense, it retains some moral overtones, probably remorse for leaving the “house of bread” Bethlehem to live in Moab where a famine hit the community and broke the family. What a painful experience to live! You leave your land, you experience loss, and death and now you have to go back defeated, poor and lonely. In this context it is understandable that you would want to change your identity. You would no longer want to be called “Sweet”. Instead you would want to be called “Bitter” because you are really frustrated and angry with life, with God and with your community. The only ones to stand by you are your daughters-in-law. You dismiss both of them but one of them insists on staying with you. You don’t like the idea but then her stubbornness prevails. Now Naomi and Ruth are alone in a strange land; no food and no way to survive. When one is experiencing isolation and stress, it is a time for unity and collaboration, not to isolate oneself and give space to bitterness. Yes many times when we face hardship we decide to walk alone. Many times we ignore people because we think we have better options. We tend to easily dismiss the people who could be God’s presence in our lives. Many times instead of trying to imitate the faithfulness and grace of Ruth, we follow and model the character of Naomi. We struggle and make our own plan, we suffer, we want to be alone and isolated. Often when we are in the midst of a hardship, we even want to change our name, and worst of all...we despise

people. We complain that God has abandoned us, when actually his presence is manifested through the “Ruths” of our lives, our families and communities.

In many ways the Christian church in the world today is like Naomi. I am like Naomi and so are you! One Bible commentary states: *Like Naomi, we are the recipients of unmerited love, and our redemption is due to someone else's faithfulness, not our own.* Yes! Our Lord Jesus Christ! All of this can lead us to another crucial principle that we need to identify in this passage; Ruth's faithful actions in this story depict an inclusive attitude toward foreigners and marginalized people. God can manifest his love, grace, power and hope through the people of our cities and communities and transform our lives and churches! He is doing that right now. The pandemic presents a great opportunity for us to find God in our families. On our church sign there is a slide that reads: “The church is not closed, it is deployed.” Yes, this is an opportunity to have interactions with different people and experience grace, to be creative and do ministry with unchurched people, to value the idea that now we have the opportunity to be Christians among other people in the community and the world. We can find hope and God's presence through the most unexpected people in times of hardship! Yes, in times of crisis and challenges, God gives us the opportunity to turn back from the land of scarcity and walk with the “Ruths” of our time!

Dear brothers and sisters, I do believe that the future of the church is embedded in the inclusivity of our church ministries, where every person is welcome and every human being is valued. We must to be alert and open to a Ruth, a stranger, a marginalized person wants to come with us and be part of our lives and ministry! Maybe that person will lead us to a place of fruitful harvest!

Have you ever known someone who has surprised you because of his or her character, life story or actions? I love art and I have learned that many times the most valued and sophisticated art is

simple. Even though it may be simple, its value is high. I invite you to take a look at this: (Here I'll show a painting)

This is probably one of the most boring paintings you will ever see. The name of the painting is *Onement VI* and you will be surprised at its value. In 2013 this blue colored canvas was sold for over \$43 million. The painting is one of the works of Barnett Newman, a known abstract expressionist. I cannot explain the technique in the painting, but I can prove that the painting is worth \$43 million. Out there, there are valuable people. For you they may look different, but in God's sight they are worth Jesus' blood on the cross.

I remember the questions of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sack in his book "The Dignity of Difference" (How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations). Can we make space for difference? Can we hear the voice of God in a language, a sensibility, a culture not our own? Can we see the presence of God in the face of the stranger? I want to say yes, I want Jesus to walk with me. Let us open our hearts to receive and walk as Naomi walked with Ruth, with everyone who brings God's presence and purpose. Amen!