

### OPENING HYMN

"All Are Welcome," verse 4, *ELW* 64:1

### OPENING PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, as Ruth clung to Naomi in her sorrow and loss, we cling to you, our Refuge and Comforter, in times of heartache. Make us vessels of your compassion. Help us to offer solace and care to those who mourn. Help us to listen deeply, to share in their burdens, and to be a reflection of your care—patient, tender, and full of mercy. Amen.

### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals (*ELW*)
- Bibles (*NRSV*)
- Paper and pens or pencils
- Optional: large paper, notebooks, art supplies, equipment to show a video

# *Where two or more are gathered: Flourishing in relationships*

## Session two

Relationships that sustain us

BY BROOKE PETERSEN

### INTRODUCTION

When I was first asked to work on this bible study This Bible study session explores the biblical story of Naomi and Ruth. These two women held fast to their relationship in the face of great loss. We'll also look at how, during seasons of grief and suffering, we maintain our relationships with others.

When we consider healthy relationships, friendships are often overlooked—eclipsed in cultural importance by romantic relationships. Yet friendships are often the first relationships outside of family where we learn important lessons about ourselves. On the playground and other childhood settings, we encounter others who delight in us, seek us out, and tell us that we are important or lovable. Friendships help us to learn empathy, develop our personalities, and grow to adulthood. Healthy friendships lead to healthier romantic relationships. When we have healthy friendships to rely on, we are more resilient, less stressed, and more able to work through difficulties in all of our relationships.

Two of the greatest loves of my life are my two best friends, both of whom I met in seminary. We've traveled together through first jobs, dating, marriages and divorces, deaths of parents and a spouse, early

days with children, and new phases of our lives. Our friendship has taught me how to care for people, how to grieve with others, and how to hold onto hope when one of us isn't sure what the next day may hold.

Of course, friendships are not always easily found. When they end, this can leave us adrift. A 2023 advisory from the U.S. Surgeon General on the “epidemic of loneliness and isolation” calls loneliness “far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death.”<sup>1</sup> Churches can help to alleviate this painful isolation, toward a kind of holy flourishing for people who are struggling to find connection.

Just like intimate relationships, friendships aren't always forever. Friendships can't always hold the intensity of life. Grief and pain can burden any relationship. Sometimes others aren't ready to meet us when life becomes challenging. According to a recent *New York Times* article, friendship breakups “represent an unrecognized kind of grief,” since platonic relationships are often considered unimportant in comparison to romantic ones. There is no map for how to navigate a friendship breakup. For many people, the ending of a friendship can be something that they carry for the rest of their lives.

For us, as Christ followers, questions remain. How do we cultivate not just healthy, but holy friendships? How do we stick around when life becomes difficult? How do we grieve the ending of a season of friendship? How do we learn to be holy friends to others? To start, let's turn to two women who are well known for their holy friendship. Their holy friendship took them on a journey to new lands and new ways of understanding themselves and their relationships, allowing them to experience the depth of God's love.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. Who is the earliest friend you

remember? What attracted you or brought you together with this friend? How would you describe your friendship?

■ **Read: Ruth 1**

Ruth promises to stay with Naomi no matter what the future holds. We often read these promises at weddings, even though her words reflect the platonic love of a holy friendship. There is something beautiful and moving about this holy friendship between a grief-stricken mother and her daughter-in-law. Accompanying one another in grief, they trust that together there is healing. In the end, they find that God's faithful promises are woven into our lives even when we least expect them.

The first chapter of Ruth focuses on Naomi. We learn that a famine has forced Ruth, her husband and their two sons to leave Bethlehem for Moab. Once they settle in Moab, Naomi's husband dies, leaving her to rely on her sons for her well-being. Naomi's identity as a wife and a mother shifts when she becomes a widow. All is not lost, as her sons marry Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. For 10 years, Naomi lives in Moab as a widow, but it would have been expected for her sons to take her into their own homes and care for her. Over that decade, Naomi likely waited for the birth of grandchildren. But grandchildren do not come. Both of Naomi's sons die, leaving her, as she cries out to her daughters-in-law, empty. Instead of being cared for by her sons in her widowhood, and by their sons after them, now she is alone in a world that is not kind to women, in a land that is not her homeland, without a safety net to support her.

Many of us have had these moments of waking up after a loss, with no clue of what the next step might be. No to-do lists or plans can protect us from the arms of grief. We find Naomi in this desolate place. When my best friend's husband died suddenly

and tragically, none of us had a map for how to walk the road of grief together. We'd thought ourselves too young to face this kind of loss. Although we were all serving as pastors, learning how to grieve this death while serving as a leader of a church community was unknown territory. Naomi's desolation, fear and grief are not artifacts of an ancient world, but shared by many of us today.

When Naomi determines that she must return to her homeland, Orpah and Ruth, the wives of her dead sons, follow her. Naomi begs them to return to their own families. She reminds them that she is too old to expect a husband or to bear other children. There is a custom of marrying widows to the nearest male relative in their late husband's family. Naomi, who has felt the "bitterness" of life, begs her daughters-in-law to leave her to her suffering.

But Ruth won't leave her. She tells Naomi that they will be forever tied to one another. So they return to Bethlehem, where Naomi is recognized despite her long sojourn in Moab. Yet Naomi tells people in her homeland that, rather than Naomi, she to be called "Mara," meaning "bitter" in Hebrew. Naomi recognizes that she once was full, with a husband and sons and a life that was protected. Now she is empty. Her grief becomes her identity. She can't imagine that life will ever be full again. While God never explicitly shows up in the book of Ruth, we get small glimpses of how people feel God's absence and, in later chapters, God's presence.

### Share aloud or reflect:

- 2.. Are there stories of grief in your life? Remember that grief can show up with the loss of a person, with the loss of a relationship, or in a variety of other ways.
3. In times of grief, how have you felt God's presence or absence?
4. Can you name people who walked with you in your grief?

Before we jump ahead to Ruth 4, let's briefly review the book's two middle chapters: Naomi and Ruth have returned to Bethlehem, and Ruth intends to go and glean from the edges of a field so that they can have grain to eat. (Deuteronomic law commanded that what was left on the edges of the field after a harvest ought to be saved by landowners for widows and orphans to harvest on their own.) When Ruth goes out, she comes upon a field owned by Boaz, a pillar of the community and a distant relative of Naomi's late husband. Ruth is noticed by Boaz, who wonders why she is gleaning in his field. When someone identifies her to him, Boaz praises her for her faithfulness to her mother-in-law. He commands his farmhands to help and not harass her. Then Boaz invites Ruth to eat and drink and enacts a faithful promise to her that echoes what Ruth did for Naomi.

As Luther Seminary Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker, the Elva B. Lovell Chair of Old Testament, states in her commentary on the book of Ruth, "a coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous." In Ruth 2, we see how faithful and holy friendship begets faithful and holy friendship. As readers, we can imagine that Ruth stumbling into Boaz's field is not mere coincidence, but the faithfulness of God.

When Naomi hears of Boaz's kindness to Ruth, she pushes her to find Boaz and lie down with him. Though the text is somewhat unclear, we can guess that Ruth finds Boaz after a particularly rowdy night, and lies down next to him. When he wakes, Ruth tells him to "spread his cloak" over her or, as Schifferdecker writes, to marry her. Boaz sends her away kindly, promising he will do as she asks.

### WHERE YOU GO, I WILL GO

■ **Read:** Ruth 4

As chapter four opens, Boaz is doing some business

at the city gate with an unnamed next-of-kin who seeks to purchase the land that is Naomi's. When Boaz reminds him that he will also have to take Ruth as part of this deal, he quickly leaves. This allows Boaz to purchase the land and make Ruth his wife. The two wed, Ruth becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child, Obed. The women of the town surround Naomi, reminding her that this child is life and nourishment, especially for a woman who had renamed herself "Bitterness," feeling that her life was empty and without hope. Obed continues the family line that Naomi once believed had ended. Even in her old age, Naomi is able to be a nursemaid for this baby.

Sometimes in the middle of our own stories, a final chapter like this seems inconceivable. After all, Ruth, a little book of just four chapters, contains hope and promise amid incredible loss and grief. While we can glean from the book's lessons of hope and faithfulness, this study is focused on what the text tells us about friendship, and what that means for us as faithful friends.

### HOLY FRIENDS

Imagine that Naomi is your friend—a friend who has suffered an incredible loss. Her husband has died, followed by her two sons. Imagine learning that this person you love is caught up in such an unspeakable loss that she can't imagine anything beyond her grief. She is so heartbroken that she can no longer be called by her own name. Imagine how she would talk to you about her loss, with tears and body-shaking sobs. Now try to feel how you would want to respond to a grief this profound.

If there is one consistent fear that comes up among seminary students in my Intro to Pastoral Care class, this is it: When someone has faced unspeakable tragedy, how do I know I won't say the wrong thing? How do I know what to do? How do I keep from making it worse?

Megan Devine, author of *It's OK That You're Not*

*OK*, is a therapist who specializes in grief. One of the hardest parts of grieving, Devine says, is recognizing how many people cannot tolerate your grief with you. The reverse is also true. Sometimes we are the ones who find it hard to be with a friend in their grief. Whether we dismiss their grief (*You will marry again! Everything will be all right in the end!*), make our helpfulness the center of the story (*I'm doing so much for you, why haven't you said thank you?*), or find that being with them is too hard, we might realize that we aren't naturally equipped to face the enormity of their grief with them. Maybe we said the wrong thing. Maybe we were silent because we didn't know what to say. Or maybe we just wanted to drop off our casserole and get out as fast as we could.

We have a cultural belief that grief itself is the problem, Devine says. Our work to find a solution is at the center of our discomfort. If we can shift our mindset to recognize that grief is an experience that needs support rather than a problem to be solved, we can walk alongside grieving people in a new way. Devine explains:

*It seems counterintuitive, but the way to truly be helpful to someone in pain is to let them have their pain. Let them share the reality of how much this hurts, how hard this is, without jumping in to clean it up, make it smaller, or make it go away.<sup>3</sup>*

As the book of Ruth reminds us, in holy friendships there is space for the enormity of grief. To be a holy friend, we refrain from trying to solve our friends' pain, and instead, accompany them through it.

One of my best friends, the Rev. Collette Broady-Grund, who I mentioned at the beginning of this study, has faced more than her share of losses. Her first marriage ended in divorce, and her second husband died suddenly and tragically. In addition, her grief had to be lived publicly, as the congregations she served walked with her through that difficult terrain. She has taught me and many others that we are not

alone in our grief, because God also knows what it means to grieve. Out of her own pain, Pastor Broady-Grund created “The Grief Lectionary,” a resource that tells those who grieve: “God’s people and Godself have felt what you feel, and lived what you are living, and struggled as you are struggling.” (To access “The Grief Lectionary,” visit <https://collettebroadygrund.com/964-2/>)

The book of Ruth provides a structure for engaging grief as a friend and as a griever. Naomi speaks a powerful truth in her loss, and Ruth stays with her, vowing to follow her wherever she goes. Ruth doesn’t try to minimize or promise a life beyond the one that Naomi experiences. Ruth merely promises to be there as the story unfolds, accompanying Naomi through it.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

5. When you experience powerful emotions like grief, what do you often feel you need from others? Do you need for people to stay close to you or move away?
6. Does your need change as time passes? Do you feel the need for practical help, presence or both?

**SHOWING UP WHEN THE GOING IS TOUGH**

When teaching students how to care for people facing loss and grief, there is no checklist I can provide that describes exactly what to do in any situation. Caring for friends and loved ones is much more complex. However, Megan Devine suggests that the following themes can guide how we care<sup>4</sup>:

1. *Grief belongs to the griever.* Remember Naomi’s cries before and after Ruth promised to stay with her? It’s clear that Ruth, who says nothing about her own dead husband, does not grieve the same way. Grief shows up for each person differently. There is no right way to grieve. How different our story would have been if Ruth had shushed Naomi or told her that she was

making her sadness worse! When we allow grief to unfold for a griever, rather than trying to control the expression of their grief, we empower people to feel their feelings in ways that are healing and needed for them.

2. *State the truth.* Instead of telling Naomi that her husband was “in a better place,” or that “God needed another angel,” Ruth simply states the truth: “I will go where you go.” We can support our loved ones by resisting the parts of ourselves that want to soothe grief by suggesting that everything is actually okay. It’s enough for us to acknowledge that this situation is deeply painful, that we are here, and that we love and care.
3. *This is not about you.* When our friends and loved ones are facing tragedy, they aren’t good at being our friends. That’s okay. We might start to have our own questions about God or why bad things happen. We might feel sad, scared, angry or just confused. We also need a circle of friends to care for us as caregivers. Grieving people do not have the capacity to care for us too.
4. *Anticipate; don’t ask.* Decisions during times of acute grief are hard. Try to notice things that may need to be done—meals, dog walks, school drop offs—and support your friend in these ways. Check in, but suggest what might be helpful, rather than asking them to give you a list. Remember that the answer to your helpfulness may be “no,” and that’s also okay.
5. *Run interference and educate.* After this study, I hope that you feel a bit more equipped to face the grief of a friend. Consider running interference and being the point person who helps organize everyone’s help. In those moments, you can educate others about how to care for the grieving—that we are not there to “fix,” but instead to bear witness. Like Ruth,

we can simply stay when grief feels hard, uncomfortable, even unfixable.

6. *Finally, love.* Listening with love is central to this work. Just as God is faithful to us, we can learn to be faithful friends to others. We can do this work with love because we have been fully loved. When we make a mistake, we can trust that God's grace is enough, apologize, and try again.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. Looking at this list of how to help a grieving friend, is there something you would add, based on your experiences of grief or caring for others who are grieving?
8. What did you learn from Naomi and Ruth about grief? What connections do you notice?

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Pour into our hearts, O God, the Holy Spirit's gift of love, that we may share the joy of friendship, human and divine, revealed in the love of Jesus Christ, who lays down his life for his friends and in whose name we pray. (*ELW Pastoral Care, Prayer for Friendship*)

**CLOSING HYMN**

"Lord Jesus, You Shall Be My Song" (*ELW 808*) or  
"Spirit, Open My Heart" (*All Creation Sings 1043*) 

<sup>1</sup> [HTTPS://WWW.HHS.GOV/SITES/DEFAULT/FILES/SURGEON-GENERAL-SOCIAL-CONNECTION-ADVISORY.PDF](https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> MOGG, K., & PEARSON, C. (2024, DECEMBER 7). HOW TO BREAK UP WITH A FRIEND. *THE NEW YORK TIMES*.  
[HTTPS://WWW.NYTIMES.COM/2024/12/07/WELL/FRIEND-BREAKUPHTML?SEARCHRESULTPOSITION=6](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/07/well/friend-breakup.html?searchresultposition=6)

<sup>3</sup> DEVINE, M. (2017). *IT'S OK THAT YOU'RE NOT OK: MEETING GRIEF AND LOSS IN A CULTURE THAT DOESN'T UNDERSTAND*. SOUNDS TRUE, P. 202

<sup>4</sup> DEVINE, M. (2017). *IT'S OK THAT YOU'RE NOT OK: MEETING GRIEF AND LOSS IN A CULTURE THAT DOESN'T UNDERSTAND*. SOUNDS TRUE, PG 237