

Sunday, November 16, 2003

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



The Steel Magnolia of the Old Testament

Ruth 1:1-22

Will You Pray With Me? Gracious and loving God, we know that every one of us has things we need to do today and places we need to go. If there is anyone here who is a little smug or cocky, knock us a bit off our pedestal, that we might be able to hear your word afresh. To that end, pour through me the gift of preaching that these words, truly O God, might be your living word to us and we know they will be for we pray with anticipation in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.

Tell me this – what do you hope will happen in your life in the next five years? If each of us were to be gut-level honest, we'd admit that we have thought about it, and have an answer to that question. We have hopes and dreams, longings and yearnings for our own life – and for the lives of our loved ones, family members and friends. Sometimes we've articulated these hopes, dreams and yearnings. Other times they remain tucked away in the private parts of our hearts and minds – never to be uttered to anyone.

Many in this congregation are single people, with the dream that they would meet a life partner – someone they'd marry, and with whom they would have children. Others are yearning for a big break and to finally get the job they've always wanted. Some are hoping that in five years they would be able to move into New York City – others that in five years they'll be able to move out of New York City. Some are hoping that in the next five years they will have fewer health concerns, or that they or a loved one will have conquered an illness. Psychologists tell us that often, when we have such hopes and dreams, we are disappointed if things don't work out as we planned, and the adjustment can be very, very difficult.

I wonder if there is anyone here today whose life has not worked out as you had planned. Let's all be honest, because isn't it true that so often our life is not exactly what we planned it to be? I remember asking this congregation not long ago, "How many of you have had to adjust and go from plan A to plan B?" And some of you

“Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you. Where you go I will go. Where you die I will die and there will I be buried.”

said, “Plan B? I'm now on plan X, Y and Z.”

That is exactly what happened to Naomi – her life just didn't work out as she had planned. She was married to Elimelech and had two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. They left their home in Bethlehem in Judah and went temporarily to a country called Moab because there was a famine in Judah and food was very scarce. Did any of you here this morning come to New York temporarily? The move to Moab for Naomi and her family was just temporary – they planned to be there just long enough to adjust and make ends meet, to get enough money together and to get enough food to eat. When they arrived there, things went wonderfully well for them for a while. There was work there that enabled them to do much better financially. Mahlon and Chilion married two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth.

Everything was wonderful, life was idyllic. Then out of the blue, as it so often does, tragedy came swift and hard. Elimelech died very unexpectedly, and within a few years Mahlon and Chilion also died. Here was Naomi in Moab – with her husband and her two sons gone from her. The only family she had left were her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth.

Naomi made a decision that she wanted to go back to Judah where she had been raised. Sometimes when you suffer a loss as great as her's, all you want to do is return to the place you know best, your home. Orpah and Ruth told her that they would go back with her. They began their travel together, and arrived at a juncture in the road. This was the moment of commitment – if they went one way they would be headed to Bethlehem and Judah; the other way would lead them back to Moab. They stop in the middle of the road, and here's where you see the greatness of Naomi. It's why I

call her “a Steel Magnolia of the Old Testament.”

Naomi looked at her two daughters-in-law, took their hands, and set them free. This was done with some cost to herself because she'd have to go on the long journey alone. At this time in history, for a woman it was important to be married in order to have any kind of security. So Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, “If you go with me to a new land, it will not be your home and the odds of your meeting someone in this foreign land are not as great as if you stay at here. Go back home where your family and ancestors are, and there and you will find someone.” Naomi set them free. Orpah gave Naomi a kiss and a hug, and took the road back to Moab.

But Ruth clung to her mother-in-law and said tenderly, “Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you. Where you go I will go. Where you die I will die and there will I be buried.” When Naomi heard those words and felt that kind of love, she knew that Ruth was a person who would stick with her no matter what, and she took her daughter-in-law with her to Bethlehem and Judah.

When they got there the city was stirred by Naomi's three losses – a husband and two sons. And they came to her to express their sympathy. “Oh Naomi,” they said, “We are so sorry.” She responded, “Call me not Naomi. (In Hebrew Naomi means pleasantness.) Instead call me Mara.” (Mara in Hebrew means bitterness.) Naomi was telling it like it is. She was angry, hurt and bitter – resentful at life and at God. She was a Steel Magnolia – flowery in some ways on the outside and yet strong and tough on the inside. (If you are looking for a book that will not take suffering, pain, anger, resentment and bitterness seriously, then don't read the Bible. The Bible takes all those emotions very seriously. The Bible is a tell-it-like-it-is narrative that always deals honestly with suffering.)

Are any of you here today in the midst of suffering? As I look you in the eye I know that there are many here today with hearts broken by many things. I know that there are many of you who, like Naomi, have suffered losses. Thanksgiving is coming, Christmas is coming, the New Year is coming, and there is an empty chair at your table. Some have had a divorce, some have lost a job, and some are battling the big “D” – depression. You've seen a therapist or two and you're trying to figure it all out. Some of you are worried about a child, or a grandchild. Others wonder if they will ever be able to hold on to a job, or a relationship. And some others are dealing with guilt and blame and shame. As we get into this theme of suffering, I want you to remember the words of Elizabeth O'Connor who gave what I've always thought is the greatest definition of prayer that has ever been written: “Prayer is lap time with Jesus.” So as you hear this message would you crawl up on Jesus' lap, let

Jesus envelope you in his loving arms and hear this message on suffering.

It grows right out of Romans 5:1-5 and the first several chapters of Ruth. Listen again to Romans 5:1-5 and let the words wash over you. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through Him we have received access to this grace in which we stand; and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings,” (listen to these three phases) “because suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, for God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

Suffering Produces Endurance

Let's take apart those three phrases, “suffering produces endurance.” The Greek word for suffering is *thlipis*. It literally means pressures. It's when life squeezes you with criticism, gossip, pressure from your boss or your company, economic pressure, loss, grief. What is squeezing you right now? Suffering comes when you're squeezed, but when you hang in there in the midst of suffering, it produces endurance. Endurance is the wonderful Greek word *hupomōne*. I love that word, it means hanging in there no matter what. Endurance is the quality of a marathon runner when he or she gets to the wall, after about 17, 18, 19 miles, and feels that it's not possible to go any farther – *hupomōne* is the quality that keeps going no matter what. I know there are some people in this sanctuary today who have run and completed at least one marathon – raise your hand if you have. Look, there are a number of marathon runners here! Now would you raise your hand if you couldn't run a marathon if your life depended on it!

Many of us have not run a physical marathon race, but we are running a marathon of being stuck in a job that's not easy or where we're not appreciated. Or we are facing never-ending medical treatments – you want to quit when you get treatment 17, 18, 19 – but you keep on going. That's *hupomōne*. The author William Ernest Henley was in a hospital in Edinburgh, Scotland. They had amputated one of his legs and were about to take the other. He was down and out and had nowhere he could go, but he wrote the poem *Invictus*. “Out of the night that covers me, black as the pit from pole to pole, I thank whatever God may be for my unconquerable soul”. That's *hupomōne*. And we know the God that Henley was talking about – the God revealed in Jesus Christ. We don't want suffering, but suffering does produce endurance, and endurance is hanging in there no matter what. When you hang in there you discover les-

sons of life that you couldn't learn in any other way.

I love the story of the intern who asked the president of the company, "Sir, how did you get to be so successful?" The president of the company answered, "Two words: good decisions." The intern said, "Sir, how do you learn to make good decisions? The president said: "One word: experience." "But sir, with all respect, how do you get experience?" "Two words: bad decisions," the president responded. See, suffering produces endurance. And you learn some lessons from it.

I'm grateful to Robert Harling for his play, *Steel Magnolias*. It's a phenomenal play, about six women in a small town in Louisiana. They're flowery on the outside but strong as steel on the inside. The first scenes of the play are a lot of fun, with laughter and, joy and a lot of kidding around with each other. But as the play goes on something amazing happens as you realize that these women are women of steel and they've got inside them a quality of character you didn't expect to find. Suffering in them, produces endurance. They hang in there with each other. And when life's major problems, including death, come, these women stick with one another. They hang in there no matter what. *Hupomōne*.

Who has been a steel magnolia in your life and stuck with you when the times were tough? And in whose life are you a steel magnolia? I love what Rev. Ammon said earlier today at the baptism, "These children will now never be alone." Did you hear her say that? It is because they are part of the community of faith, with *hupomōne*. We hang in there with each other no matter what – that's what Christians do. We don't run away from each other, we pile up the miles – 17, 18, 19 – of the entire 26 mile marathon.

Endurance Produces Character

So, suffering produces endurance – hanging in there no matter what. Endurance produces character. The Greek word is *dokime*. It literally means "fire that purifies steel." Steel is placed in a blast furnace, and the fire purifies it, burning off all the impurities. Coinage that has all of the impurities burned off becomes sterling. All the impurities are out. Suffering produces endurance (hanging in there no matter what). Endurance (hanging in there no matter what), produces character. Meaning all the impurities start to be burned off and you start to shine like silver and be strong like steel.

Do you know a person of integrity, courage, valor and honesty? Those qualities are not humanly produced, they come through the fire of suffering when you've hung in there a long time and you get endurance, *hupomōne*. When you get endurance for the long haul, then you get character – the kind of character in which you see honesty, integrity, valor, courage. The very first

hospital visit I ever made as a seminarian was when I was 21 years old, just out of college. I was in my first year at Princeton Seminary. I was trying to figure out how my studies of theology and Greek and Hebrew were related to the every-day lives of people. And I went on a hospital visit with Dr. Robert Kelsey, one of my field education supervisors at Central Presbyterian Church in Summit, New Jersey.

We went into the room of a man who was to have surgery the next day. Dr. Kelsey wanted to pray with him. I will remember as long as I live that the man apologized to Dr. Kelsey because he was afraid. He was anxious and worried, and he said to Dr. Kelsey, "I'm trying to be strong. I'm being as strong as I can be." Dr. Kelsey heard him out and then very gently said to him, "My friend, the biblical word for strength is not 'be strong' The biblical word is to accept the strength. We can't be strong by ourselves – all we can do is open our hands and receive the strength from God." "So when we pray," Dr. Kelsey said, "I'm going to put my hands out and Tom is going to put his hands out, and you put your hands out too and we're going to receive God's strength." And we prayed that way. And we realized that we have to receive God's strength. It can't be humanly produced.

Character Produces Hope

Have you tried hard to be strong on your own, when all you have to do is receive God's strength? Suffering produces endurance and endurance, like Ruth and Naomi sticking together, hanging in there no matter what produces character. The kind of character that when Ruth and Naomi went to Bethlehem, their character produced hope. There in Bethlehem was a man named Boaz who immediately saw Ruth's character. Remember that character isn't just naturally produced. Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character. When Boaz saw Ruth's character and integrity and joy – all qualities that she received from God – he asked her to be his wife. And Ruth said, "Yes."

You know what's so interesting about this story? Naomi was so bitter and so angry, she came to the people and said, "Look, I went away to Moab with my hands full but I've come back and my hands are empty." Don't ever think that God is finished working in your life. For empty hands may become full sooner than you think. Ruth marries Boaz, they have a child, Obed. They both needed to work so Obed was entrusted into the hands of his grandmother, Naomi – and her hands were full. And Obed had a child named Jesse and Jesse had a child a shepherd boy named David. You certainly remember David! He became the king of Israel and Naomi was the great grandmother of David the king – and then 28 generations later, she's the great, great,

great, great, great grandmother of the Messiah Jesus.

Do any of you have empty hands? Are you thinking that you're not needed anymore – you're too old, you can't make a difference? Be very sure, God may surprise you and put something in your hands – if they are open – something that would change your life. Endurance produces hope, received from God, hope is a magnificent word. The word hope means undefeatable joy. The kind of joy that no circumstance could ever take away. The kind of joy that is absolutely unable to be defeated. It's the kind of joy and hope that Daniel had in the lion's den, and Shadrach, Mishach and Abendigo had in the fiery furnace, and Jesus had on the cross – that all those things cannot ultimately defeat God. God is the last word on today.

Let me tell you about another steel magnolia? She's been around this church for many years and quite a number of you have met her. Her name is Susan Galloway. She was married to John Galloway, one of our summer preachers for many years. Almost every time John has ever preached here, Susan has come. She always greets with John and is a partner in the ministry. Several years ago she was diagnosed with Lou Gerhig's disease. She was told that she wouldn't live very long. She deteriorated all to quickly to the point where she could hardly speak, but when she did she was always more interested in us than in herself. Finally the time came where she couldn't speak at all anymore and this past summer when John came here to preach, she wasn't able to come with him.

Even though Susan couldn't speak she wanted to tell her family and her friends that she loved them – so when they would come into her room she would just make a little heart with her hands and hold it up saying she loved them. She was always doing this. At the service for her mother this fall, their daughter Katherine got up to speak and told the story about her mother special way to tell everyone that she loved them. And she said to the congregation, "Would all of you just in honor of my mother make a little heart." And spontaneously Katherine made a heart, looking up to her mother,

telling her that she loved her, and everyone in the sanctuary did the same thing. As they left that service they realized Susan Galloway isn't dead. She's alive in heaven because love never ends. And that's the hope that nothing can ever take away.

Suffering produces endurance. Endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope cannot disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. I'll let you in on a little secret. Ruth and Naomi and Susan Galloway are steel magnolias. Are we?

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