**Unexpected Joy**

Sermon by Dewey Williams

9:00 a.m. June 4, 2017

Central Prison, Death Row Raleigh, NC

*13So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. 14Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him.” 16Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom, and became his nurse. 17The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, “A son has been born to Naomi.” They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.*Ruth 4: 13-17 (NRSV)

**Introduction**

I am going to tell you two stories about adult women, which adopt one another as mother and daughter. One is a biblical story, and the other is a contemporary story. In these stories the bonding of these women was not supposed to happen. Society had constructed rules that dictated that these women should not be mother and daughter. As I tell the two stories there will be a lesson for life attached to each story. Let’s look at the first story.

**I. The Story of Naomi and Ruth**

The story of Naomi and Ruth is one of the most familiar in the Old Testament. It is a story that usually focuses more on Ruth, and thus the book is titled after her. But I often think of it as a story more about Naomi. The beginning of the book starts with Naomi and the end of the book concludes with Naomi. In between, we see the merging of two unlikely candidates for familial ties. The Hebrew Naomi and her husband and their two sons are living in Moab because of a famine in their own land. Naomi is Hebrew and Ruth is a Moabite. Nationalism and ethnic purity were strong barriers in that era. They are strong tendencies toward barriers in our current era.

As we view Naomi initially, she had to be happy, and if not happy, she had to be hopeful for the future. She has a husband, and she has two sons. Some say, that means she had three sons. Her husband represented fulfillment in the current day, but probably what gave her great joy was her sons and the prospect of having grandchildren. Naomi was living it up off what she had and what she expected to have.

But we learn that Naomi’s husband suddenly died. Ouch! That had to have hurt her deeply. The story then says her sons married Moabite women, but her sons both suddenly died. Ouch and ouch again! This trilogy of deaths stopped me cold in my tracks to ask why are these men dying? The most probable reason was war. War then and war now takes lives. War has always been a widow- maker and if my speculation is right, it reached into Naomi’s life with a vengeance.

Today, I have to say that imprisoning men in the criminal justice system has been another means of killing off men from families. Prisons have taken men out of the picture; out of the family; out of their wives’ lives; out of their children’s lives; out of their parent’s lives, and out of their communities. All of this is taking place when men are at their peak time of productivity when they should be producing good outcomes. Prisons have served punishment just not on the men incarcerated, but also on the loved one’s who do not get to benefit from the presence and resources of the men incarcerated. Just like Naomi and her daughters-in-laws felt the pain of being separated from their men, prisons can do the same thing to families today.

We find one of the Moabite women, Ruth, attaching to Naomi and together they move to Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem. After some maneuvering, Ruth marries Naomi’s relative, Boaz. Ruth and Boaz have a son. That is where we pick up on the text today. Naomi is holding Ruth’s baby in her lap. What a joyous picture. This woman that had lost so much is now enjoying the role as caregiver to Ruth and Boaz’s child. If you cannot see some joy in that we need to check your pulse.

On top of that, the record is that the women that lived there got involved. They started saying, “Naomi has a son.” It was like they had a baby shower for Naomi. Something special happens when a baby is introduced into a room full of women. There was a shared joy that seemed to permeate the community. This was not a personal joy. To me, there is something suspicious about personal joy that is just for you or just for yours. Real joy is shared.

The moral of the story of Naomi and Ruth is that the journey to joy takes us through devastated aspirations and broken lives. Crumbled aspirations and broken lives are fertile ground for God’s work to be revealed. Often it is our intact aspirations and intact lives that hold God away. A shattering or a breakage is an opportunity for God to get through to us.

**II. The Story of Jeanne & Regina**

Now let’s look at the contemporary story. The story of Jeanne and Regina is a story with an ending unlike any that I have ever heard. Regina was an African American little girl when her mother turned her over to Social Services saying that she could not take care of her. Regina’s mother and father had addiction problems that put Regina at risk of not receiving the care that a child should receive. Regina began a season in her life where she was moved from foster home to foster home, from placement to placement, from group home to group home. Regina said she stopped counting when the number of placements hit thirty. She tells stories of even being abused in some of these foster homes. Some of the changes in placements were because the system failed her. Some were because the foster parents failed her. And some were because she made it hard for anyone to love her.

At the age of twelve she was tired of moving from place to place and she ran and turned herself into the local police station. Her case goes to court and at age twelve she is sent to the Edgar Children’s Shelter in San Francisco, a group home for girls. While there she meets a counselor by the name of Jeanne, a white woman, who encourages her and connects with her in a way that no one had ever been able to in the past. Regina gave her the nickname she never used for any of her foster mothers. Regina sometimes would call her “mama”. Listen to what Regina says Jeanne told her one- day. “No matter what – there will always be something or someone for everybody.” [[1]](#endnote-1)Regina reported that her response to this statement was that “Somehow I made myself believe that God, in his plan, had made sure that nobody would never, ever in a million years be left on their own without being held up or helped out.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Regina came alive while Jeanne mentored her, and Jeanne became committed to seeing this young lady thrive. To Regina, Jeanne was that someone that God had placed on this earth to help her. At some point they entertained the notion that Jeanne would adopt Regina, and they both got excited about the possibility of Regina getting to leave the group shelter and have a more normal upbringing in a home. Who could oppose such a marvelous opportunity for this young lady? Jeanne applied to Social Services and petitioned the courts to adopt this child that no one else was coming forward to adopt.

There was one problem, Jeanne was white, and Regina was African American. In the 1970s there were strict rules forbidding cross-racial adoptions in that community. The motives were honorable and well-intended. They wanted children to have upbringings that were culturally aligned with the child’s family of origin. But with no one stepping up to adopt, surely this would not prevent the adoption. Well, the petition was denied. As a matter of fact, the courts indicated that the Jeanne’s continued treatment to the Regina was hampering other potential placements that they thought were better for Regina. The day that they thought that Regina would get to go home with Jeanne was the day that Jeanne was ordered to stop having contact with her all together.

At that moment the systems failed the Regina. The system that was supposed to be providing a beneficial service was used to work against what was best. The system did not make sense. Some of you men incarcerated can relate to systems that do not make sense. There are times that the prison rules make no sense. The ways things are done make no sense to you. The time things are done make no sense to you. Who does different things makes no sense to you. Often the system seems to fail to achieve what is best for everyone. Just like Jeanne and Regina faced a system that made no sense, you will often face a prison system that does not make sense to you.

In the face of a system that made no sense, Regina later Reflected on what Jeanne had done for her, Regina writes in her memoir, “I wanted to let her know that for the first time someone had stood up and fought for me, just plain ole me. Not for the money they would get from the county, or wherever – but b’cause they just liked me. But most of all I wanted her to know that no matter what – no matter what – it was more than good ‘nough to know that finally, finally, somebody had wanted me for their own someone, just like I’d ‘magined. I wanted her to know that this was more than anybody had ever wanted for me.”

Regina eventually graduated from high school and college and starts an upscale beauty salon. It is so successful that she opens a second one. Regina tries to find Jeanne as an adult but is unsuccessful. Regina had started a family and she was doing well financially, but she felt a need to tell her story of pain growing up in all these placements. She wanted other foster children to know that there is hope and that they are not alone. Twenty-five years after the last meeting with Jeanne in the shelter, she writes her story and her book titled *Somebody’s Someone* is published, and it becomes a sensation. She was on a radio program telling her story when one of the former employees of the group home heard her and she knew Jeanne was now living in Alabama. She called Jeanne and told her about the book and that Regina has a website.

To make the story short, Regina and Jeanne were reconnected in 2003, twenty-five years after they last saw one-another at the group home. Jeanne loved Regina as a daughter, and Regina loved Jeanne as a mother. That same year, they went to the same courthouse that had denied the adoption and petitioned that Jeanne would become the permanent mother of Regina. They found a judge that heard about the story, and a formal ceremony was held making them officially, Mother and Daughter. Regina was in her forties when she was finally adopted.

The moral of this story is found in Regina’s words. “I made myself believe that God, in his plan, had made sure that nobody would never, ever in a million years be left on their own without being held up or helped out.” Regina found a truth that is an enduring truth for all of us. God has a plan that involves us giving and receiving help from one another. I am here for you, and you are here for me. We are here for one another. You may think you are alone, but that is not God’s plan for you. And it is not what God wants you to feel.

**Conclusion**

We have seen these two stories of women forming unusual mother-daughter relationships. So often in life the unusual will happen if you give God the room to make the unusual happen. We often allow race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, and religion to create barriers that hold back the joy of aligning with God’s will. Naomi and Ruth rejected all the reasons they should not be mother and daughter. Jeanne and Regina were told no to being mother and daughter, but eventually they were brought together for a unique bonding experience.

The truth of the matter is that the systems and circumstances tried to take the joy out of their lives. Looking at Naomi holding Obed in her lap, I think I hear Naomi saying, “I still have joy.” After going through the death of my husband; after going through the deaths of my sons; after having to move back home; after a season of depression; after facing the fact that she won’t have any biological grandchildren. I think I can hear her saying, “After all I’ve been through, I still have Joy.” Looking at Regina now being able to claim Jeanne as her legal mother, I think I hear Regina saying, “After being abandoned by my biological parents; after being shipped from home to home; after facing abusive caregivers, after being separated from the person that showed me genuine love. I think I can hear Regina saying, “After all I’ve been through, I still have Joy.”

I venture to say that there is someone here in this worship at Central Prison that is willing to say, “After all I’ve been through, I still have Joy.” Someone here has gone through something, and you still have joy. You have gone through sickness; you have gone through hard times; through career changes; through court hearings; through losing everything; through marital break ups; even through divorce; through times of children being in trouble.

Just like Naomi’s and Ruth had a tough time with losses, and just like Jeanne and Regina had a tough time with disappointments, in the end hope ruled in their lives and they had joy. This is true for you today too. I believe that there is someone here who will say, “After all I’ve been through, I still have Joy.”

I would like to teach you a simple song. It says:  
I still have joy. I still have joy. After all I’ve been through, I still have joy. I still have joy. I still have joy. After all I’ve been through, I still have joy.

1. Regina Louise, Somebody’s Someone, 356 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-2)