Sermon: Who is a Mother?
Scriptures: Ruth 1:6-18 and 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Let me start off first by saying: Happy Mother's Day to all of the mothers, grandmothers, stepmothers, aunts, teachers, and friends for the children who you have loved, guided, encouraged and cared for. There are so many people who have a profound influence on our lives, who help us, teach us and love us.

Everyone knows what a mother is supposed to be, just Google it! If you Google the word Mother right now, you will see the most beautiful and amazing words. In short, you see perfection - Kind, loving, strong, faithful, loyal, patient, angelic, unselfish, etc. The truth is most of us are not all those things all of the time. I think moms beat themselves up sometimes because they are not perfect, but just a little reminder that even Mary, the most famous mother in the Bible, seemed to annoy her Son! At the wedding in Cana. When they ran out of wine, Mary probably felt embarrassed for the hosts not being able to take care of their guests, so she looks at Jesus and says, "They have no wine."**4** And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." **5**So Mary completely ignores what Jesus says, and tells the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." You know the rest of that story – Jesus performed His first miracle so a little push from mom was a good thing!

I can tell you as a mother, I was not always patient and I was rarely angelic, but there are two things that I did have that are missing in that description of mothers: unconditional love and faith. Unconditional love is a love that is unselfish love that will not diminish and a love that expects nothing in return. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1). We may not see what God is doing but trust that He is moving. It is prayer and faith that helped me as I raised my children. It was my faith that God would make up for the shortcomings of a stressed, divorced mother of three teenagers. And God did not let me down because I am blessed with three smart, hard-working, stubborn and funny adult children.

Today however, our story is about a mother-in-law. Shocking I know as a mother-in-law, the one who is usually the subject of many complaints and jokes. This story is much different.

The story of Ruth takes place during the time of Judges in the bible. This was a period of 325 years of sin and consequences, a time when the Israelites lost their way. The people would abandon God, do as they pleased and when things when completely amuck, they would call out to God to save them. This was repeated over and over, and in the midst of this, we hear of the story of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi.

The story begins with Elimelek , which means "God is my king" and his wife, named Naomi - which means "sweet one", which sounds like a match made in heaven. They

live in Ephrath (Bethlehem), Judah and they have two boys, named Mahlon and Chilion but during this time, there was a terrible famine going on in Judah. Elimelek decides to leave Bethlehem (which oddly enough means "house of food"). Elimelek makes a tough decision to move his family to Moab. Now moving to Moab was like moving to Sodom - not a great place to bring your family. On top of that, Moab was one of the nations which had oppressed Israel so moving there would have been discouraged. But Elimelek left the land he owned, the land he should pass on to his sons, because he had to feed his family. While living there, Elimelek died and Ruth was left with her two sons. Both sons married Moabite women Orpah and Ruth, and after living there ten years, both sons died. Naomi and her daughters-in-law are now three widows. This is a terrible fate as widows were among the poorest of people and were often taken advantage of. The nearest relative of the dead husband had a responsibility to care for his widow but Naomi had no relatives in Moab and did not even know if there were any left in Judah but she did hear God had blessed Judah with food again and this would be the time of the barley harvest.

So, as you heard in the reading, Naomi is heading back to the land of Judah where she and tries to send her daughters-in-law back to their mothers so they can find new husbands. What a tough decision! This will leave Naomi on her own but here she is with an unconditional love for them – worrying about them and knowing their best chance was to find a new husband since they were both young and had no children. Both women protest but Orpah finally relents however Ruth totally refuses stating what I think is the most profound statement, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go, I will go and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, even if death separates you and me." What an exclamation of unselfish love! Remember, Ruth could have left and taken care of herself, but I believe she felt she could not leave Naomi on her own. She was willing to go to Bethlehem and be looked at as a foreigner.

Well, what could Naomi say? They headed back to Bethlehem and once there, it definitely raised some eyebrows. When Naomi's people saw her, they called her name, but Naomi had become frustrated and felt that God's hand had turned against her. She was pained and frustrated so she told them to call her Mara, which means bitterness, to show how she felt. Although not rejecting God, she did not lean on Him.

Ruth decided to go out to the fields and glean wheat behind the harvesters so she and Naomi could eat. She wound up in the fields of Boaz. Boaz goes to the field, sees her and asks his overseer who she is. The overseer replies, "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi." He explains that Ruth asked permission to glean and gather behind the harvesters. He tells Boaz, "she came and has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without even resting for a moment". Boaz is moved by hearing all of this, goes to Ruth and tells her to stay in his fields and to follow the women. He tells her he has instructed the young men not to lay a hand on her and to

take water from the jars whenever she is thirsty. Ruth is so overcome by his kindness, she bowed down with her face to the ground asking him why he is showing her – a foreigner – such favor? Boaz explains he has heard all that she has done and is doing for Naomi and blesses her saying "May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge".

At mealtime, Boaz offers her bread and roasted grain. Ruth eats but saves some for her mother-in-law. Boaz also instructs the men to let her gather without rebuking her, even to pull out some stalks from the bundles for her, showing his kindness and generosity. Ruth continues to work until evening, then beats out what she had gleaned and brings home an ephah of barley to Ruth, which equates to a bushel.

You can imagine how happy Ruth must have been to have this man watch over her and when she returns home, she tells Naomi of the day's events. Naomi is delighted and tells Ruth to stay with the women in Boaz's fields because in someone else's fields she may be harmed. She also tells Ruth that Boaz is a close relative and one of their guardian-redeemers. So, Ruth did this every day and continued to live with her mother-in-law.

Just a note here: Based upon Deuteronomy 25:5–6, The law directed that a relative (a guardian-redeemer) of a man who dies is to marry that man's widow in order to perpetuate his lineage through this woman. That custom continues in some countries to this day.

We find God's plan at work here. How wonderful that His Word has so many messages for us. So many examples of His intricate weaving of events that make us think, gives us hope, and reminds us that He is always there for us. We know it was no accident that Ruth happened upon Boaz's fields, no, it was God guiding Ruth to Boaz's fields, touching Boaz's heart and giving both Ruth and Naomi hope.

Ruth continues to go to the fields until the harvest is complete. Now Naomi's maternal instinct kicks in and she tells Ruth that she, Naomi, must find a home for Ruth so she will be cared for. Naomi tells Ruth to get washed, put on perfume and her best clothes, then after Boaz is done threshing (which was done at night), and had something to eat and drink, he will lie down to sleep with a blanket on the threshing floor. She tells Ruth to uncover his feet and lie down.

Now this may sound a bit provocative to us, but this was an Israelite custom and law, for a servant to lie at the feet of his master and together with the change in her appearance, this was a nonverbal way of requesting marriage. his would inform Boaz that he could be her guardian-redeemer – he could marry Ruth, or he could find someone else to marry her. Boaz wakes up during the night surprised to find her at his feet. Boaz is moved by her act of loyalty and that Ruth has not run after a younger man as he is older, but as a man of honor, he tells Ruth there is another next-of-kin who is closer, and he must offer Naomi's land to him first. The he tells her to rest but

to leave before morning so her reputation will be protected. Before she leaves, Boaz sends her away with six measures of barley, so she does not go back to her mother-in-law empty handed.

The next morning Boaz meets with the other kinsman and with ten of the elders as witnesses. He says Naomi has returned from Moab and is selling Elimelek's land and tells the kinsman he has first right of refusal, and the kinsman says he will buy it but Boaz reminds him that with it, he will acquire Ruth the Moabite in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property. That changes the kinsman's mind he tells Boaz to buy it. Boaz announces he will buy the property and take Ruth as his wife. He does all of this in front of the witnesses.

After they are married, God blesses Ruth with a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the Lord, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For you daughter-in-law who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Then Naomi took her grandson in her arms and cared for him. The baby was named Obed and he became the father of Jesse and Jesse became the father of David. We never know what God has in store, do we? Who would have guessed that the love of a Moabite daughter-in-law, a Gentile, would lead her to become the great-grandmother of King David? God knew and for all the anguish of loss and displacement and waiting, Naomi ends the story no longer empty but full. Our prayers and faithfulness can extend well beyond our lifetimes.

Amen