

Scripture: Ruth 1:19-22

Title: Don't call you 'Mara'

1. Can this be Naomi?

Naomi returns to her hometown Bethlehem after 10 years. A decade is not a short time. Look at me. I had so much hair 10 years ago, but now I only have a few strands left. 10 years ago, a decade meant something different as life expectancies were shorter. A person could have aged dramatically in 10 years. When Naomi returned to her hometown after 10 years, all of Bethlehem was in an uproar. At that time, it was not uncommon for travelers to visit from afar. However, Naomi returned home after no one heard from her for 10 years since she left. It was a family of four when she left, but only two had returned. When she left, Naomi had three reliable men, but when she returned, she brought her daughter-in-law, a stranger. It seems like even back then, people liked to gossip and talk about other people. It was clear that Naomi's homecoming shocked the whole village. The heat of the gossip showed people's interest and love for Naomi.

For women, 'antiaging' seems to have been a topic of great interest both in the past and now. It is natural for people to grow older as the years go by. However, those who are subjected to some severe hardship or heavy labor age more quickly. People were whispering, "Can this be Naomi?", "Is she Naomi?". They probably thought to themselves, "What the heck happened to Naomi that made her look so old? I didn't even recognize her". Last week, I was on facetime with my older sister. She called me again the next day almost in tears. She said that she called me again because she was worried that I might be sick because I looked so old when we facetimed the day before. I reassured her that it was the lighting that made me look so old and unwell. But I don't think that made her worry less about me. Living away from home can make us age quickly, whether we know it or not.

There is a concept called Food Miles. Food miles are the distance food travels from the place of production, through transportation and distribution, to the table of consumers. When I was training to be a missionary, the instructor applied this concept to missionaries. When missionaries leave Korea, their mind and body weakens the more further away they are from Korea. This is proven in many clinical trials. For example, a missionary in Guatemala can be emotionally more burdened than a missionary in Japan. According to the studies, Korean migrants living in the United States may age much faster than migrants living in China due to distance. Perhaps, the reason why it was hard for the people in the neighborhood to recognize Naomi was because Naomi lived far away from home for too long.

2. Don't call me Naomi

Few people will be happy to hear "You are so-and-so". I guess Naomi also wasn't feeling the happiest when people were asking, "Can this be Naomi?". According to scripture in verse 20, Naomi responds bitterly to such reaction from the townspeople. "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara from now on." What did Naomi mean? The name Naomi means joyful, sweet, and happy. Mara means the exact opposite of Naomi. It means bitter and suffering. Naomi was expressing how bitter she was by telling people to call her a different name. Why did she call herself Bitter, Suffering? Her God made her that way. She was blaming God for all of her suffering and hardships she's experienced.

In verse 21, we can see Naomi speaking harsh words as if she were laughing at God. She said she went away full but the Lord has brought her back empty. She claims that the reason is that 'Shaddai', called the Almighty, afflicted her and brought misfortune upon her. 'Shaddai' is one of the names of God, and

it was a title that ancient people called God, meaning 'Almighty'. She wanted people to see how the Almighty has made her so incompetent. A thorn seems to be hidden in these words. If God is omnipotent, how can my life be so bitter and full of suffering? In short, she was saying that God is incompetent. So she tells people not to call her Naomi but to call her Mara.

But I can understand how she must have felt. Frankly, Naomi would have left her hometown with dreams of her golden return. But she returned home with nothing in her hands. She has lost everything. Naomi's confession that she came back empty would have not only meant for her pockets but also the state of her mind. It is often said that when a person suffers incomprehensible hardships, his heart is broken. And when hardships and trials are prolonged, it is said that a deep hole is formed in the heart. That means it will be difficult to recover. Some people are impolite and rude maybe because of these scars from hardships and suffering. It's a natural reaction for people who have gone through hardships that have made them think they've been abandoned for a long time.

3. Ruth, the daughter-in-law from Moab

The last verse of chapter 1 concludes by summarizing Naomi's misfortune. However, there is much foreshadowing even in this short statement. When the passage states that Naomi had returned, who did it state that she returned with? She returned with her daughter-in-law Ruth, a Moabite woman. Naomi is also saying she wasn't alone. There was someone with her. And it gives information that the time when the two returned was around the beginning of harvesting barley. I didn't just say "It was time to harvest the barley then." Naomi and Ruth are implicitly informing them in advance that luck and happiness await them.

When a person begins to believe that he is unhappy, he will only see unhappy things. I see only what was taken away from me, but I do not see what is left of me. As Naomi looked at her own life, it was empty. She seemed to have nothing left. But the bible says that Naomi had a Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. And when they returned, they said that Bethlehem had a good harvest of barley. Naomi had a hometown to return to, and people from her hometown who cared about her. Naomi doesn't feel at all that these things will serve as a protective fence for her. Her heart is so empty that she has a hard time seeing it.

If you live as an immigrant in American society for a long time, you will face unfair things in many ways. We do not know at what point and in what place it will happen, but when we live as immigrants, frustrating and unfair things come to us unexpectedly. As we live being victimized by well-spoken and powerful people, the sense of victimization builds up and we become defensive. When I first came to the United States four years ago, I felt the unique defensive and aggressive mentality of people who had lived in the LA area for a long time. Those who have lived a long time may not feel it. However, those who had just come from Korea or those from other regions could feel it. If you have an understanding of the unique defensive temperament and victim mentality of immigrants, you can fully understand Naomi's state of mind. Even if you are not an immigrant, you naturally lose the viewpoint that takes an optimistic view of yourself as you develop a viewpoint that instead focuses more on trying to foresee trials and tribulations that may come up in life. There are many times when I can't see the precious things that have been given to me.

4. Is Mara empty-handed?

After 10 years of living as an immigrant, Naomi seems to be left with nothing, but in reality she had a lot of things. We suspect that her daughter-in-law would have followed her when her son died because Naomi was a good, genuine person. Ruth wouldn't have said that she would follow her mother so adamantly if Naomi was a mean person. As I said last week, Naomi and Ruth are giving each other "Chesed." You could say it's a mutual benefit. As Naomi does her best to take care of her daughter-in-law, her daughter-in-law follows her mother-in-law. The atmosphere in which the people of Bethlehem welcome Naomi also seems warm. Naomi seems to be remembered as a good person in Bethlehem, to the point where her whole town is interested. According to the law, she was not allowed to welcome Moabites into her tribal community. Even though they had to kick Ruth out right away, they turned a blind eye and tolerated it. It was because the people of her village embraced Naomi and understood her situation.

There is something I felt when I briefly visited California a year after I left California. 'So many friendships have been formed in the three years since I came to the United States. Still, I think we lived well.' A friend let my family stay at their place for a week and cooked delicious meals every morning for us. Another friend of mine also let us stay at his house and sail the Pacific Ocean on his sailing boat. During the two weeks we stayed, the weather continued to be chilly, but only on the day we went to the sea by boat, the sun shone all day and the temperature rose to nearly 90 degrees. I wondered if God thought of us like this. There, I deeply felt the value of friendship. As I came back after receiving so much love, I came to think that a good relationship with many people is a great asset to me. When I came to America after being expelled from China, I came with a really empty heart like Naomi, but I was able to look back and see that God filled so many things for me.

Naomi said she had nothing, but Naomi already had many intangible treasures. What Naomi didn't realize was that her friendships with her family and neighbors were her greatest asset. And those friendships were the result of her usual well-lived life. Whether you're staying in Rochester for half a year or a year, don't neglect the friendships and relationships you've built here. We do not know now where and how we will meet and what kind of connection we will have with each other. There was a sudden flood in a village where someone lived. Everyone was swept away by the great flood and died, but he alone was able to survive. He was able to grab a soccer ball and float on it, and he said that the soccer ball saved him. But the soccer ball he said was the soccer ball he lost last night. Who knew that one little thing I missed would save my life? The relationships we have are truly precious. As Naomi herself said, she was never empty-handed. She does not have much confidence in the potential power of the people of Chesed. The reason why the people of Chesed have great power is that it moves the heart of God.

5. Living a life that makes people feel like they are home.

How is your life? Do you think your life is a life of Mara or Naomi? Is your heart broken by the series of bitter hardships in your life? Are you blaming God for the empty bank balance? Aren't you resentful that there are only people around you who hate and harass you, and that there are only people who leave you rather than people who gather for you? Emptying the bowl is the first step to filling it with something. There are times when God takes something out of our lives and makes it empty. At that time, what if I think that God is rather emptying me to fill something? 'Nothing can be held in hand, but I still have many friendships and people who support me. I can stand up with their help and encouragement'.

You may have more than you think. At least these people here to worship together are on your side. Aren't you relieved? 'No matter what anyone else says, I will support you. I trust you. No matter who criticizes or slanders you, I will support you.' Aren't you thankful that you have brothers and sisters who are your strong support with this kind of heart?

Why does God give us a community? Because we cannot live alone. The principle by which Satan governs the earth is called divide and rule. Satan knows very well that when we unite, we become strong, and when we unite, great power is generated. So, division is the strategy of Satan. His basic strategy is to make factions, build parties, and divide within the church. Our attitude against these divisional strategies should be unity and rule. Anyone who belongs to this community must be accepted and cared for. We should be able to embrace and go together with anyone.

The Bethlehem village community chose to be inclusive, rather than sticking to the standard of the law for Naomi. Rather, they decided to take pity on her. They shared her pain and accepted her Moabite daughter-in-law. For Naomi, the village community was her strong supporter and fence. Can Naomi still say she has nothing? Can Naomi still tell people to call her Mara? Stop defining yourself as Mara. Don't say that I have nothing, I have no one to support me, and I am empty. We have an Almighty God. And we have a family that He allows us to be part of. There is a church community and there are many friendship relationships. Let's be grateful for what we've been given. Let's be thankful even when the reality seems empty. Maybe it is actually empty right now, but maybe the emptiness means that it will soon be filled by God's grace. I hope that all of us will faithfully respond to each and every relationship given to us and practice Chesed now. We hope that our lives will be enriched and that good things will come to our lives through the relationships we have established here and now. Do not treat your neighbors, co-workers, and friends badly. They are given by God for us to love and serve.

I've said this a few times already. I express the love for our neighbors as this: making that person realize that his or her life is beautiful and valuable no matter who they are and where they are from. One pastor said that neighborly love is making them feel like they are in their home, in their home country. My hometown is a place that always welcomes me and cheers for me. I hope you will become the person who makes others feel like they are in their hometown.

There is a song called 'Living away from home' written by Boksoo Go. "How many years have you lived away from home? I picked up my hand and looked at my hair. Ten years since I left my hometown, only my youth grew old / The willow tree in front of my hometown will be green this spring too, but the time when I played the willow flute was long ago."

The remorse of living in a foreign country is contained in every line of this song. We also experience bitterness and suffering here at one point or another as immigrants. My hope for our community is that we will become each others' hometown and make them feel home. I hope that anyone who enters our church will feel genuinely welcomed and feel like they are in their hometown. I bless all of you who become the providers of a "home away from home" to others around you.