

October 31, 2021

**“There's No Turning Back Now”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said,

*“Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!*

*Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.*

*Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.*

*May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,*

if even death parts me from you!”

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Mark 12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself;—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Sermon "There's No Turning Back Now"

I love these two scriptures so much and I think that it's perfect that they are paired together this week in our lectionary. Everything that you need to know about loving each other, yourself and your God is right here. We have a whole lot of scriptures to choose from but they are just icing and sometimes distractions to these two.

Sometimes I feel like I'm just preaching the same thing over and over again and the fact is that I am. I may use different stories, themes or scriptures but our faith story always comes back to love. My responsibility as your preacher is to try and make that fact relevant every week to your own lives, in the here and now and of course to try to keep you awake in the process.

This message of love is so vital in the midst of culture wars, schisms, rapid change, pandemic fatigue and our new found awareness of the great need for healing and hearing that our survival as a democracy and planet depends on.

Let's look at the passage from Ruth first, I don't think I fully understood this passage until Julie and I left our home, our people and our jobs and moved to Alabama to take care of my Mother-in-Law with dementia. I thought of this passage often during the hard days, the days that I was emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausted.

If you have ever been a caregiver you know what I mean, it is hard and though I would never give up one of the moments we had with my Mother-in-Law. There are many shameful memories I wish I could wipe from my mind because I became too tired to be patient, too overwhelmed that I would get short with her, forgetting for a moment that she couldn't help doing what she was doing.

But even though we had moments of failure, what we had been given for her was a love that would not let go, a love that would not give up, a love that would not turn back and I will never regret it.

The gift I got from it was knowing that I have untapped reservoirs in me as I think each and everyone of us does. God given well springs that don't run dry even when our own resources do. That is the kind of love that Ruth had for Naomi. But I want to point out something else here. Look how Naomi under-valued herself.

“Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?” And she goes on to call herself bitter.

Naomi valued herself based on whether or not she could offer something tangible to Ruth and Orpah. Naomi valued herself based on her inability to reproduce, the loss of her station in life now that she had no husband or sons. And she devalued herself because she was grieving, feeling bitter, over the loss of that husband and those sons, and the way things used to be.

It's Ruth's timeless response to her that is love incarnate. She basically says, “Heck NO, I'm not going anywhere, you are mine and I will not let you travel this lonely road alone. You are stuck with me and the love I have for you makes me incapable of turning back now.”

Hold on to this you all. This is how love is done when the road gets tough. But also hold on to this; our value to God, our value to each other isn't about our ability to produce, our ability to be positive and upbeat even in the midst of grief and despair. Our value comes just from being humans, wonderfully made in God's image for this: to love and to be loved.

Naomi still had something to give, even if she couldn't work another day in her life, bear another child, was dirt broke, and too sad to be fun. What she gave Ruth was a sense of belonging, of being needed, of still being family to someone and of being loved.

Jesus also can't make this clearer to us than in the Gospel reading from Mark. Oh we can convolute such a simple statement, put conditions and roadblocks up for others, but Jesus doesn't stutter in this declaration of the most important commandments.

The first is, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” There is no other commandment greater than these.

Our Faith Formation Curriculum this week made a very important point. That Jesus is putting two different scriptures from the Hebrew texts together. It says “Jesus begins with the ‘Sh'ma’ of Deuteronomy “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, The Lord is one.”

Next Jesus quotes the words that follow in Deuteronomy adding for himself the word “mind” to loving God with all your heart, soul, and strength and then he pulls from Leviticus 19 calling for us to love our neighbor as yourself.

Jesus brings the two commandments together in a way that links love and justice. The verse he quotes from Leviticus follows the prohibitions from exploiting each other, making loving of neighbor about acting justly towards others, especially the poor and vulnerable.”

This is important in understanding Jesus as a preacher, remember he had what we called the old testament as his bible and in his message he took two passages that he thought were important to his listeners understanding of what God really wants from us.

To love God, not just in a worshipful, praising way but in our actions toward each other. He adds mind, evolving our faith in a way that makes thinking, and reasoning, a Godly act and reminds us that acting justly toward each other is how we love our neighbor.

This isn't always that simple. It's sometimes easy, some people like you all are easy to love, but we know that isn't always the case with all people. I can't tell you how many times I have had to pray before I open my mouth toward someone.

Especially if that person is hateful, or plays like they are a victim when they aren't. I am exceedingly challenged when someone bullies others, or criticizes just for the sake of criticizing. I get riled by people who take their feelings out on others.

We have plenty of toxic people in the world right now. All we can do sometimes is have good boundaries, make sure we protect ourselves, and not let their toxicity turn us into someone we aren't. It's not easy, some people just seem to enjoy finding our triggers and weaknesses.

But here's the thing, they too are worthy, remember going back to Ruth, our value comes from being God's, our worth comes from God, not anything else and nothing that we do. Not following this commandment to love one another doesn't disqualify anyone from God's love.

It will keep them from feeling the peace that comes when we know we are loved and worthy but it doesn't take away from their inherent worth. To use a simple metaphor, God's love is like wifi, it surrounds everyone but you have to have the password to experience it and the password is love.

When someone rubs me the wrong way or triggers my Irish, what I at least try to do, when I remember, is to pray quickly to myself. My prayer usually goes something like this, “God please sit on my tongue for I am having trouble loving this person in front of me but I know that you do.”

What usually happens is that I suddenly see their pain, I see the fear behind their outrage, I see their broken heart and that will melt my own heart toward them. Then I find that wellspring again that allows me to tap into God's love, even when mine has run dry.

There are so many people in the world who didn't have the love and support that I've had and have in my life, or the privilege that I've known, so many people who didn't have someone to

teach them how to deal with strong emotions, so many with so much pain and no where for it to go but out.

Our task is to show them a different way, to show them love beyond their current comprehension. Our task is to find ways to make sure our ways are just ways, that we treat each other justly and make sure that the systems that we support do too.

We are all a work in progress, our growth depends on how willing we are to take responsibility for those rivers of influence that have shaped us– the good and the bad, and in between. Our work is to own our energy and interactions and work on it without blaming others but instead utilizing God’s help and each other, because we are each other’s people. My God is your God and we won’t let each other travel this road alone. AMEN

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