

Remember – Love is the way we honour others

Ruth 1: 1-18; Mark 12: 28-34

The love of God transcends cultures and social expectations. The story of Ruth and Naomi and Orpah is a story of mixed marriage, of immigration, mixed religion, and a redefining of family and social norms. This story takes place in a time of relative peace between Israel and Moab. There was a famine in Israel and because of that Elimelech, a citizen of Bethlehem, took refuge with his family in Moab. Now, while in Moab, Elimelech and his two sons died, leaving his wife Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth to their own devices. We hear in the story today, Naomi's plea to her daughters-in-law to return to their families of origin, for Naomi has no choice but to return to her homeland of Israel. The custom at that time was that if Naomi had another son, then the daughter-in-law would marry that son and would therefore be provided for. However, the reality of the situation, as Naomi points out, is that even if she were able to find another husband and have children, there's no way that Ruth and Orpah would wait to marry the child, once they were of age. Naomi had no means to support Ruth and Orpah, which was now her responsibility. So, she pleaded with them to go and leave her. Clearly, none of them wanted this, we heard that they were in tears, and in the end it is only Orpah who agreed to return to her home. Ruth however, in a moving display of fidelity and affection, chooses and decides to stay with her mother-in-law regardless of the consequences. Ruth, who is a perceived enemy of Israel is the one who ends up embodying selfless love. A love that Jesus wishes for his followers to do which we heard in the Gospel lesson today.

This is a story where two women, through whom God works, are able to break down walls that divide. This is "a story of someone whose *hesed* (steadfast love) will not be restricted by ethics or religious boundaries."¹ God's love has the power to redefine what we define as family. God's power is able to redefine what we value. What's interesting is that I believe both women end up honouring Naomi, their elder. Ruth honours Naomi with her loyalty and Orpah honours Naomi by respecting her request and going back to her home. God wants us to honour each other through our love, which was explained in the Gospel lesson when Jesus is asked by a scribe what

¹ Gary W. Charles, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, p. 244.

is the number one most important thing. And Jesus' answer was simple; it's to love God and love your neighbour. To love God entails a complete giving of oneself to God: Our heart, our mind, our spirit, everything about us is to love God. As it says in 1 John 4: 8, whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love. Victor McCracken explained it this way,

“So, love of God requires all of us. Love of neighbour cannot mean that one gives all of oneself to neighbour for to do so would therefore be an act of idolatry.”²

When Jesus says, that we must love our neighbour as ourselves, he is talking about what many have come to understand as “Radical Welcome.”

Radical welcome has been defined by Stephanie Spellers as:

“The spiritual practice of embracing and being changed by the gifts, the presence, the voices, the power of the other the people systematically cast out or marginalized within a church, a denomination, or a society. Your church may be predominantly white or regardless of your demographic profile you still have a margin; a disempowered other, who is in your midst or just outside your door. In fact, you may be the other. Radical welcome is concerned with the transformation and the opening of individual hearts, congregations and systems so that the other might find in your community a warm place, a mutual embrace, and so that you are finally free to embrace and be transformed by authentic relationship with the margins.”³

To love all people as God has called us to do, we need to acknowledge our fears and our uncomfortableness. To become radically welcoming we need to let go of our preferences in order to make room for someone else's. Sarah Nichols wrote,

“We have to lay down our preferences to make room for someone else is not about me. Because of who we are as a community you may need to lay something down on the altar. Sacrifice it. If you explain it in that way maybe people will see that it is a privilege to let, go of it like this. You will be blessed in many ways as your God gets bigger and bigger.”⁴

Ruth did this. She sacrificed her family and her faith to be a part of Naomi's life. Jesus is calling us to change our hearts and minds so that God's mission in this world can be fulfilled. Patrick Keifert explains, “Jesus is urging his disciples quite literally to turn around. To turn to a new way, a radical, hospitable way that breaks through the old hierarchies and patterns of relationship in order to issue in God's new call. The call is to be converted and to be transformed for the sake of the just whole, the living reign of God.”⁵

² Victor McCracken, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, p. 262.

³ Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, the Other, and the Spirit of Transformation*. (New York: Church Publishing Inc. 2006), p. 156 Kindle Edition.

⁴ Sarah Nichols, *Radical Welcome*, p. 124 Kindle Edition.

⁵ Patrick Keifert, *Radical Welcome*, p. 816 Kindle Edition.

So, how do we do this? How will our words and actions reflect and embody the love of God and neighbour so that we can live this radical welcome. We need to listen and embrace. I reread the book called “Radical Welcome: Embracing God the Other in the Spirit of Transformation” by Stephanie Spellers this week and I have drawn much of the wisdom from this book to share with you today and the concepts that she presents in there. She starts by sharing a concept by Miroslav Voth, who believes that we love through mutual embrace, through four movements; through opening the arms, waiting, closing and then opening arms again. As we explore these concepts think of it more metaphorically rather than literally. Radical welcome begins with a desire to reach out beyond yourself in order to connect with others. This happens through the opening of your arms, creating space for the other to come in. This is the invitation. And then we need to wait. You can’t force the other person to come in. Radical welcome does not grab, force or coerce the embrace, for then it is not mutual. If, and when the other though chooses to step into the embrace, then there is a mutual closing of the arms; a mutual indwelling. Holding the other with the bounds of yourself and finding yourself being held by the other. It’s not a merging of two into one. The goal is not to master the other but simply to receive the other on their own terms and seek relationship. And then finally, there is again the opening of the arms. Now is the time to reflect on what we received from that embrace. There is a chance at this point to rediscover your own identity. How have you been enriched by the others presence?⁶

Now, this is relatively easy to do with people who are like us. Moving to a radical welcome though? The radical welcome embrace requires the broadest extension and opening of self, for it calls us to embrace the marginalized, the silent, and the oppressed stranger. So how are we transformed when we embrace our neighbour in unconditional love in this radically welcoming embrace? At this time, I want to calm some of the fears and thoughts that might be rising in your mind. Radical welcome is not an invitation to assimilate. Radical welcome is not reverse discrimination. It also is not political correctness or reactionary throwing out the baby with the bath water. Spellers is very clear when she wrote,

“An abundant and radically welcoming attitude says there is room for everyone to be heard and that there is something beautiful, valuable and holy that everyone brings to the holy banquet. Including those that have sat at the head table for a long time. It is deeply faithful, deeply committed, to welcoming and participating in the continuous, powerful, surprising in-breaking of the reign of God.”⁷

It’s about finding yourself utterly accepted and embraced by God and then running into the world and in your community to see how you can extend that hospitality to others. It is possible to honour who we are and who we have been when we practice mutual embrace and mutual invitation. We are reminded today that God acts through Ruth, God acts also through us. When we receive this love from God, we can then offer unconditional love to others. It’s through this love that we are able to live out our Statement of Welcome and Inclusion. It’s through this love

⁶ Miroslav Volf, *Radical Welcome*, p. 315-318 Kindle Edition

⁷ Stephanie Spellers, *Radical Welcome*, p. 354.

that we are able to act with Holy Manners. It is through the courage and the trust in God that we are able to live out our call in this world. A call that asks us to break down barriers that divide us; to find a way through to a place where everyone is valued for who they are. That is our call. That is what you are asked to do as you go from this place.

Thanks be to God. Amen.