

Sermon Pentecost 24 B 2021

I am sure you have moved, relocated at different times in your life. Today it is almost unheard of for people to live in the same home all their lives. Years ago, many years ago it was expected that you would live in the same village even if you moved from one home to another. That would have been true in Jesus time as well as in Old Testament time. The things that would cause a family to move were often drought leading to famine. Of course, God also played a role and Abraham relocated a very long way because God called him to do just that. Back in 1987 Mike and I talked about relocating to the USA with our three kids. They were all very excited and nine years old Judith wanted me to affirm we would be going to Disney world. Needless to say, "yes" was my answer but I remember thinking to myself, "What's Disney World?"

Yes, we relocated because Mike had a good job offer. But in today's first lesson Naomi and Elimelech with their two sons relocated to Moab, the next country because of the famine in their own. They were needy foreigners. But sadly, Elimelech died soon after they arrived. Did Naomi feel she was being punished by God because she had left Israel? It does not say but when bad things happened in that time period, people felt they were being punished for some reason. But imagine her anguish when after 10 more years both her sons died. Was she being punished because they had married foreign women, girls from Moab? Poor woman. But she must have known the Israelites had been told to keep themselves separate from foreigners. What torment she must have been in. But she did not stay in a depression; she acted. She made the best decision she could based on new knowledge. Having learned that the famine was over back home and the harvest season was beginning meaning there would be food available, she decided to return to her home land, after all there was no future in staying in Moab. She must have felt that friends and family back in Bethlehem, her village, would support her better than the Moabites even though she had lived in Moab for a long time. All this was Naomi's story.

What of Orpah and Ruth. They had each married a foreign man and moved into his home. Did their families approve of these marriages? I imagine if the 2 husbands were wealthy there would have been approval, but it did not seem likely Naomi and family were rich. When the two husbands died 10 years later it must have been a terrible calamity. We do not know why or how they died but leaving three widows destitute was indeed a calamity. Women then usually had no income or paid work. Keeping the home going took a lot of time and energy. Naomi was going back home but the situation for Orpah and Ruth was critical. Could they return to their former homes as widows? Would another man except them? Remember they had married a foreigner too. We do not know what happened, but the scripture tells us that after conversation, Naomi persuaded Orpah to return to her former home. Orpah must have realized there was no future for her with Naomi, second husband. Naomi was returning to Israel and that was not a place Orpah knew. The logical thing for Orpah to do was to return to her own people. Maybe they would pour scorn on her for making a bad decision in marrying a foreigner with no wealth or maybe they would welcome her kindly and compassionately. We do

not know. We hope they received her kindly. But we all make decisions which sometimes don't turn out well or seem unwise later.

Let's now think about Ruth. Was it that she thought she would not be so well received by her former family or was it that Ruth had the kindest heart in the world that made her stay with her mother-in-law? Ruth must have realized that if Naomi tried to walk back alone, she might never make it back safely. So, Ruth gave up her identity as a Moabite living in her own country worshipping in the way practiced there and being around people she knew. She accepted the challenge of relocating to a new country to live among people she knew nothing about who practiced a different religion and were known to be very close knit. She might have feared she would be ostracized as a foreigner by the Israelites. However, she would in fact find that the Israelites understood they must offer hospitality to strangers; it was written in their law. If you wish to know the rest of Ruth's story you can read it in your Bible. It is short. You will learn that Ruth was encouraged by Naomi to glean from the fields owned by Boaz, a relation of Naomi's. The law dictated that poor people could enter the fields after they were harvested and collect the produce from the edges of the fields, which had been intentionally left for them. The happy ending was that Ruth later married Boaz and her great grandson was King David. Ruth the Moabite woman was part of David's ancestry which in turn was part of Jesus' ancestry.

What I love and you may love too are the words Ruth spoke to Naomi when Naomi encouraged Ruth to return to her own people.

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.

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried.

May the LORD do this and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

I read that one priest said that if a wedding couple asks for this passage to be read, he invites the bride to say it to her mother-in-law. He confesses that no bride has ever accepted his invitation! Just imagine! But Ruth showed supreme love in these words, so deep and so intense that as you heard read Naomi ceased from encouraging her to return home. Naomi did reach Bethlehem, her own village and was welcomed by the villagers. But she shared the bitterness of her experience. She said all she had brought back were the clothes on her back. God had dealt harshly with her, she claimed. Did she doubt God loved her? At least she was safely home again and the barley harvest about to begin would allow Ruth to glean so they would have food as long as it lasted.

I share with you that what we see have in this story are examples of the laws God had given the people through Moses. We understand that by Jesus time the religious leaders had added many and generally distorted the essence of the original intentions of the law giver, God. Jesus must have been aware that the Hebrew scriptures, what we call the Old Testament of the Bible listed over 600 laws, of which the majority were prohibitions. However he easily summed

up the laws as you heard in the Gospel today into two essential laws. The people were to love God with every fiber of their heart and soul and to love their neighbor as themselves. When you think of Ruth's love for Naomi you see that second law exemplified. You also see that Naomi might have had a hard time continuing to love God through all the tragedies she suffered, but eventually she could see how God had been with her, sustaining her through the deaths of her husband and sons and giving her a new family with Boaz, Ruth and her children and grandchildren. God did not cause the men in her family to die. God helped her through the tragedy and sustained her in the time of crisis in her new country and into the prosperity she had when the wealthy Boaz married Ruth.

I imagine you do not spend a lot of time thinking about God's laws and how well you are keeping them. But I am sure you are aware of times when you have broken any. You may have a feeling of guilt, and you are ready to bring it to God in confession. Laws are important; they are trying to keep us safe; God's laws are important for our souls, to keep them safe. But look how positive Jesus is about choosing which two are the most important. He cites none of the negative ones, just two positive all encompassing ones. He tells you to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. They are of course bound together. When Ruth loved Naomi, she was loving God. When you love another person so are you. There is a beautiful line in a song from *Les Misérables*; Jean Val Jean sings, "To love another person is to see the face of God."

Today we continue our theme of stewardship in October, giving of yourself in response to God's love. This is also what today's first reading illustrates. How are you planning to give thanks to God for that wonderful love God has shown you in the giving of Jesus Christ to be our Savior. God came among us because God loved the world so much he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16) You heard of Ruth and her willingness to give completely of herself for her destitute mother-in-law. You heard Jesus' admonition to obey the laws of love. I invite to dwell on this in the days ahead and give thanks to God in your heart today every day.

Amen.

