

“The Balancing Act”

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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 one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons or 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 had consideration for 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 neighbour 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 neighbour 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.

Will you pray with me? Gracious God, the living word is before us and today we will wrestle and consider. We will work together. And I ask that you open our hearts to hear your word for us this day and what it means for us both as individuals and as a community in a life of faith. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Okay, I want you to raise your hands if you miss all the phone calls from the election campaign [laughter]. Yeah, I kind of feel that way myself [laughter]. But that annoyance aside, I will say that Election Day is always a very powerful experience for me. Everytime I vote I am moved by the fact that we come together as individuals. And we may vote differently in the booth, but we come together as a community. And I also realize that this is a privilege that a lot of people around the globe don't have. I know last week a number of you shared about your voting experience on Facebook. But there was one post in particular that touched me. And I've talked to Rebecca Bealmer. So she knows I'm going to say this because the post was from Rebecca. And it was a picture of her going to vote with her three children under five in tow in a wagon. And she said that she took them because she felt it would teach them about civic responsibility. And I agree with her. I remember taking my children when they were young. And I think it did have an impact. They are now in their 20s and they believe voting's important. And when election issues come up, they ask really good questions. And if we don't want to dig deeper, they will. We discuss not only how the outcome might affect us as individuals but other people as well. For example, the minimum wage decision that we had to vote on had the power to impact both the workers as well as business owners. So it's important. We have to remember that decisions have implications and it's not always easy. It's a balancing act sometimes realizing that while an outcome might have a negative impact on me as an individual, it may help a lot of other people. And it's important to consider both sides of the issue.

So I think the Gospel reading today addresses that in part. It's a balancing act between individuals and community and faith. And when I opened to study the passage in the last couple weeks, I was reminded that the greatest commandment question also appears in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke but in a somewhat different manner. The readings from Luke and Matthew have a much more tense part with them in this particular reading. They share the scenes of local leaders who are testing Jesus, and they are the scribes and the Pharisees who have power and they like the power they have. But Jesus and his teachings are challenging some of that, and they are trying to corner him by asking him trick questions. But the Mark reading has a different tone. In this account, one of the scribes who has heard the negative comments flying around approaches Jesus directly and he seems to be very sincere in asking the question, "Which is the greatest commandment?" And Jesus gives him an answer right out of the Scriptures. One is this is the traditional Jewish prayer from Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord with all your heart, your soul and your mind and strength." And then from Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." There is no other commandment greater than these. Jesus makes it very clear that God and the individual and the neighbor are all connected to each other. And it appears the scribe gets the message. Because he says how we treat our neighbors is even more important than making sacrifices. Now he doesn't say don't make sacrifices, or they don't matter. But he sees the two aspects of the commandment as so tied together that if you really love God, you must love your neighbor. You can't live out one part of the commandment without the other. It's a reminder that wants, and needs are held in tension with the wants, concerns, and needs of others.

So in reading this morning the verb used to describe the relationship with neighbor is love. Agape. Now that seems like a strong word to us, but remember in Greek there are four different words for love. And in this case, agape refers to a complete and selfless love and expects self-giving. Agape love as our first commandment means stepping back and asking what does this mean? It means putting the love of God and neighbor first and not just acting according to what we think is best for our neighbor without really thinking about it or asking them.

Now I don't know about you, but there are times when a little challenged by the commandment to love one another. You know sometimes people grieve on us, they do things that really annoy us. But we're still called to love them, to treat them as a child of God. Agape then in Greek is not about those we like and enjoy. It's broader than that. And it's a big difference. I learned some wisdom about that when I was planning a memorial service with a family, and they shared one of their mom's favorite sayings. When someone did something that really annoyed her she would say, "I love him, but I don't like him." I think she got the point. For at heart that's what it means. While this person may drive me crazy, I still have to treat them with respect as a child of God. Agape is not about liking or considering someone who is a lot like us. It means loving another human being as a neighbor. I think it's also important to remember that the word faith in Greek is a verb and not a noun. Faith then is about action and relating. It's about how we treat one another. It's

not only about our individual relationship with God, it's reflected in our relationship with neighbor.

And indeed Luke's version of this story brings this up. For the leader who is testing him in this passage has a follow-up question. He asks, "And who is my neighbor?" Now Luke has set this up very carefully to lead right into the parable of the good spirit. The parable that tells us that even the unexpected ones are our neighbors. Because Samaritans were rejected by Jews, and in this parable, we find that a Samaritan is willing to do what others are not. Help a Jew who is injured and suffering. So why don't the others do anything? Well, they know that the law states that "Touching a person who's been bleeding makes one unclean." And so, for them to do that would mean that they would have to stop and do a cleansing ritual before going on their way. But for the Samaritan, the greatest commandment supersedes the others. Helping another in need trumps the need to keep ourselves clean. Helping the neighbor is more important. So returning to the teaching on the question from Luke, "Who is my neighbor?" Luke wants us to see that neighbor means more than those who are just like us. And I think that brings us to this morning's reading from Ruth.

Now, Ruth is not an easy book to read. A lot happens to her. Jewish scholars sometimes call her the "Female Job," but I think there is a slight difference in this book and the Book of Job. Ruth does not focus so much on the question of why she suffered, but the intriguing way in which she finds herself and her way to a new life. Now, the reading that Larry read tells us that Naomi's family moved to Moab from Judah because of a famine. And if you know your history, you find out that this is really surprising because the people of Judah and the people of Moab have great disdain for one another. But while they're in Moab, Naomi's husband dies. Her two sons get married to local Moabite women but then, they die and there are no heirs and a famine is looming in Moab.

So Naomi hears that food can be found back home and wants to head back there and her daughter-in-laws follow. But at a certain point, she tells them to go back because they'll have a better future in their homeland, and Orpah decides to do just that but Ruth does not. And from her, comes that amazing statement, "I will not leave you. Your God will be my God. Your people, my people. Where you live, I will live." A powerful statement of love and relationship. So we find that Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah and their husbands had created a most unique and unusual family that crossed ethnic lines and traditional hostilities. They even worshipped different gods. Yet, in the midst of that, they connected, and they were brought together and they stayed together.

Ruth is willing to give up though, the life she knows in order to maintain that relationship with Naomi, and Naomi takes a risk too. She has the risk of bringing home someone who is a stranger from Moab. They're both vulnerable. Two different women, two different backgrounds, who become family and a community. I think their story reminds us that belonging and community are important. They provide support and the gift of being known and loved. They are not concerns just for themselves as individuals, but for each other. In order to thrive and survive, they need each other. And love triumphs over logic. So despite their backgrounds, that are different, Naomi Naomi and Ruth embrace each other while Naomi does-- while Ruth does adopt Naomi's faith, she did worship other gods at one time. The message of Ruth and Naomi is an important message for us to remember in these days. Through them, we are reminded that different people can come together even when it's most unexpected. And when it happens it can be powerful. And as I thought about this, two different stories came to mind. One is an episode from Northern Exposure. That's one of my favorite series [laughter]. In the episode, Dr. Fleischman has arrived in Cicily. He is going to be the doctor for the town. He's only there though because he has to pay off his debt from medical school. And as we watch him, we find he think he's ended up in the craziest place with the most clueless people. But over time there is some change. One day Dr. Fleischman learns that his uncle has died. And as a Jew, he wants to say the Shema, the prayer for the dead. But in order to hold worship, he has to have a minyan. There have to be 10 Jewish people in a quorum. But there are no other Jewish people in Cicily. But the town's folk can sense the yearning of Dr. Fleischman to remember and to carry out a tradition. And they put out the word to other parts of Alaska trying to get 10 Jewish people to come. There's a lot of distance, a lot of bad weather and time is an issue. And finally, Fleischman so touched by their efforts decides that this bizarre, quirky place is his place, his community. And he decides to say the prayer amongst these people that he belongs to. The other is a more contemporary story. Not long after the deaths that took place at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, leaders of a congregation of the local Muslim temple met to decide how they could help. And they decided to raise money to help bury the dead and ease some of the financial burdens of the families. Their goal was \$25,000 but last I knew they had raised nearly \$200,000.

The generosity and compassion of those who share the same god but a different faith was that they saw themselves as neighbors and lived out a holy act of community. To truly love God we must be willing to look out for and love our neighbor. Those two things are inextricably intertwined. If we treat them as separate then as individuals we become the center of our own world. God is the creator and source of all life and love. And love, concern, and awareness of neighbor brings us all together in faith. A neighbor can be someone with mutual beliefs and backgrounds or maybe not. We are called to be those who have the courage and willingness to connect simply on the level of our shared humanity. We are called to do that even when people put up barriers to keep it from happening. As people of faith, we are called to live out the balance of self and community in the name of the Trinity, the God who is one yet three, a community, the one who calls us to come and be united. Amen