

To be Faithful

A Sermon on Ruth 1:1-18 and Mark 12:28-34 by the Rev. Philip Major
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'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.' And *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* There is no other commandment greater than these. In his reply, Jesus is leaning into a peculiar characteristic of the Jewish faith: our devotion to God is inextricably connected with whether or not we are devoted to honoring and caring for one another.

This is true for us, as well as for our Jewish brothers and sisters. If we are disciples of Jesus, we cannot love God while hating other people. We cannot pretend to be respectful of God if we are not respectful of the people God has created. We cannot be faithful to God if we are not faithful to the people God has given us.

We learn what it means to be faithful from the story of Ruth. In the story of Ruth the main characters are women. This is the first thing we learn about faith; faithfulness is not about our gender. It makes no difference whether we are women or men. Women are not lesser, or subordinate in the eyes of God. We can be faithful to God and to one another regardless of whether our closest relationships are with women or with men or with some combination of women and men.

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 story of Ruth tells us that God's people are sometimes refugees. Elimelech and Naomi were some of God's faithful people and they left their homeland because there was no food for them to eat. The same thing is true today. Many people who are leaving their homelands are like Naomi and Elimelech; they are faithful people who make difficult journeys to help their families survive.

Naomi and Elimelech were from Bethlehem, which used to be called Ephratha, so they were called Ephrathites. *They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and Naomi was left with her two sons.* Naomi became a widow.

This points toward another part of what it means to be faithful. Being faithful means that life happens to us, just like everyone else. Being faithful means we don't turn life into a blame game. Death is part of life. Being faithful means not accusing God of killing people. Naomi did not cry out to God, "God, why did you kill my husband?" God is with us, even in our times of being completely alone. Faithfulness means experiencing death and not letting our grief keep us from living and loving.

Naomi and her sons were living in the land of Moab. And the two sons *took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other was Ruth.* This was the controversial part of the story. In other passages of scripture, the men of Israel were ordered to never marry a woman from the land of Moab.

So we come to understand that different passages of Holy Scripture appear to be in conflict with one another. One strand of Holy Scripture is concerned with keeping the nation of Israel separate from other nations. The isolationist strand of Holy Scripture is concerned with the purity of the nation of Israel, as if their bodies could be poisoned or contaminated by contact with people who look different or speak different languages.

The book of Ruth argues against these ideas of racial purity and isolationism. The foreigners are not to be feared or to be avoided. In the book of Ruth, the foreign woman who looks different from the women of Judah is the star of the show and the example of faith. When we read more of the Old Testament, we come to realize that Ruth, the foreign woman, eventually became the grandmother of Jesse, and the great-grandmother of David, the greatest king of Israel. So acceptance of the diversity of God's people is another part of faithfulness. God's salvation is for all people, even for the people you used to think of as your enemies.

In the Gospels, Jesus expands on the theme of salvation being offered to all people. Jesus is constantly breaking the purity codes that attempted to keep the people of Israel isolated from the Samaritans, the Romans, and those with diseases or physical deformities. Jesus deliberately crosses the physical boundaries that separated Jews from foreigners, the same way Naomi and Elimelech crossed a physical boundary that separated them from the Moabites.

So Naomi is now living in Moab with her two sons and their foreign wives. *When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. Then Naomi started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard that the*

famine had ended...Naomi said to them, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your new husbands."

Here is where things get controversial for some of us in America. The controversy is around the issues of security and independence and community. America is a very religious country, but the most common religion of America is not Christianity as it is described in the New Testament. The most commonly held religion in America is a religion of individualism. The religion of individualism has a creed. It begins with the phrase, "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." It continues with the phrase, "I have the right to choose, including the right to choose what kinds of guns I will have in my home, or carry through public parks." The religion of individualism tells us each person is responsible for their own security.

The book of Ruth tells us security is communal. The book of Ruth reminds us none of us can survive on our own. So being faithful means finding security in our communities, by building relationships and working with others to get the work done and take care of each other.

After Naomi said farewell to her daughters-in-law *she kissed them, and they wept aloud...Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and returned to the house of her mother, 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 shall be my God."*

You have probably heard these verses before. That's because, in the Christian tradition, these verses are often read at marriage ceremonies. Let's let the details of this sink into our hearts and minds. For many centuries Christians forbid two individuals of the same sex to marry one another. Two people could join their lives together in marriage, but only if one of them was a man, and the other was a woman. Yet one of the most common passages of scripture read at these marriages was this passage from the book of Ruth, which depicts a relationship of faithfulness and love between two women. We have no indication that Naomi and Ruth were in some sort of sexual relationship, but that only gives the passage more impact for many of us.

The relationship between Naomi and Ruth helps us understand that being faithful requires us to be persevere through the difficulties of life together, and to not give up on one another. For many people, this is what it means to be faithful in our marriages. But in Holy Scripture this idea of faithfulness also applies to our other relationships.

Just as Ruth and Naomi treated each other with trust and respect, so we are called to create relationships of trust and respect with one another. This applies to us especially in our congregations, because in our congregation we are overtly striving to be faithful to one another, as well as to God. As Christians we understand the two are related to one another.

The final idea of faithfulness comes from my favorite verse of all, verse 16: *Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God.* Ruth is saying that she is willing to be changed, to give up something of herself, in order to stay in her relationship with her mother-in-law.

If we are going to be faithful to one another, there will come a time when each person in the relationship will have to be willing to change. This does not mean that one person is submissive to another, or that we lose our identity as individuals. But it does mean we have to be willing to let go of some part of ourselves in order to be faithful to one another. Sometimes we have to give up something that is precious to us, like our time, our money, or our ability to make a decision without regard for others. Sometimes we have to let go of something that is keeping us from working together or taking care of one another.

Being faithful to God requires us to change the ways we relate to other people. Being faithful also requires us to change the way we relate to ourselves; we must be willing to let parts of ourselves be changed. We have to let go of our pride, our selfishness, our grief, the idea that we are the victims, or the illusion that I am right, in order to be faithful to one another, in order to be faithful to God.

To be faithful means to live into the reality that God's love and God's salvation are intended for all people. Being faithful means finding true security in the communities God has given us. All of us experience many challenges in life, yet being faithful means having confidence that the love of God and the love of the people God has given us is enough.