

Ruth 1:1-18

¹In 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. ²The 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. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These 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, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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. ⁸But 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. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹But 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? ¹²Turn 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, ¹³would 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." ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷Where 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!" ¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Mark 12:28-34

²⁸One 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?" ²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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.' ³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³²Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³and '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." ³⁴When 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.

My Peeps

November 4, 2018

On Monday evening this past week, Anna and I gathered with nearly 300 or so people in Boone for a Candlelight Vigil honoring those killed at the Tree of Life Synagogue last Saturday. It was an interfaith vigil and there were folks there who were Christian, Muslim, Bahai, Jewish, or non-religious, all gathered to give honor to the fallen victims. We gathered at the Baptist church and then proceeded to walk through the downtown area of Boone to the Jewish Temple. It was about a quarter mile walk. There were so many people that we had to walk on both sides of the street. We walked in meditative silence and I can't tell you how

powerful it was to see all these diverse people, young and old, black and white and brown, rich and poor, Jewish and gentile, all walking in reverence and silence. Even the dogs walked with a sense of peace. We gathered at the Jewish temple to pray and sing. We heard the names of the victims read aloud and mourned together the seemingly endless violence in our world. As I walked along the road with all these strangers I couldn't help but remember our reading from Ruth today and those words she uttered. "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."

This is one of the most profound statements in the bible of God's inclusive and all-encompassing love. That Ruth who is not a Jew, who has no reason whatsoever to follow her mother-in-law Naomi, speaks the most powerful message of love in the bible. One that I think Jesus reiterates today when he reminds that very wise scribe, that loving God and loving your neighbor, are as near to the Kingdom as it gets this side of eternity.

It has me thinking about a couple of things. Firstly, how do we love God with all our hearts, minds, souls, and strength? And second, who are your neighbors; who are your people? Now language is a funny thing, isn't it? I remember a few years ago when we began to refer to our good friends or family as our "Peeps." Do you remember when you first heard that? We would send out texts or Facebook posts to, "All My Peeps!" It means to all my people or maybe, my *kind* of people. The group I hang with or call family, whether my biological family or the family of friends that I know. It has a lot of meanings. Now I may be dating myself, but my first thought when I heard that word was, of course, those little yellow marshmallow chicks that we give out in our Easter baskets. That's all I can think of when I think of Peeps! And maybe that's where it originated. They are like a whole bunch of little chicks that make peeping noises. And the words from Ruth remind me that my idea of who my 'Peeps' are, is a whole lot broader than I can imagine, and I'll come back to that in a minute.

The other thing that sort of haunted me, forgive the Halloween pun, is Jesus' affirmation of faith for the nation of Israel, the great Shema, that the life of faith is one where we love God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength and that we love our neighbor as ourselves. As I was dwelling on this passage this week I began to ask myself, "How do I love God with all my heart, or with all my mind or soul, or with all my strength? What does that mean and what does that look like? Do you know? When I think about the word 'heart', all kinds of images come to mind don't they? The heart, the center of life, the metaphorical center of our feelings; love, hate, compassion, joy, just to name a few. You hear phrases like, "With all your heart" or "Put your heart into it" or "follow your heart." But what does it mean really to love God with all your heart?

Now before I offer any thoughts about that let me say, that I think this is something that happens over the course of your life. It will take all your life to understand and grow into this loving relationship with God. It will, of course, begin somewhere, but don't be overwhelmed, ok? For me, and I speak only for myself at this moment in time, for me, loving God means...allowing God access to your whole heart, mind, soul, and strength. That there are no places within you where God cannot be present. That you don't have any place that you are secretly holding back, no closed doors, no secret places, no forbidden places where God is not welcome or allowed. That you have opened yourself, your heart, your mind, your soul, your bodily strength, and welcome God's presence into all those spaces.

This is risky of course, the ultimate trick or treat moment. A moment where you take off your masks. (sorry for another Halloween reference.) It may make you feel a little vulnerable. It may change how you live and move and breathe in the world. It may change how you listen and see and understand your place in the Kingdom. And finally, it may change how you see others. All those others who are also on this journey of life and faith. You may begin to see them as God does, as your beloved sisters and brothers. Those pesky neighbors that Jesus reminds us to also love with all your hearts as we become the people God calls us to be. Those neighbors that

believe differently, that have different languages, that are poor or rich, that come from other cultures and countries, that come in all different colors and religions, that are so like Ruth and Naomi, seeking new life and vowing to walk together come feast or famine. Those neighbors that will challenge the depth of your love for God.

It reminds me of that song I shared a while ago that was made popular by singer Ronda Vincent that goes like this.

*There are many people, who will say they're Christians
And they live like Christians on the Sabbath day
But come Monday morning, till the coming Sunday
They will fight their neighbor all along the way*

Refrain:

*Oh you don't love God
If you don't love your neighbor
If you gossip about him, if you never have mercy
If he gets into trouble, and you don't try to help him
Then you don't love your neighbor
And you don't love God*

*There's a God Almighty, and you've got to love him
If you want salvation and a home on high
If you say you love him while you hate your neighbor
Then you don't have religion, you just told a lie*

*Oh you don't love God
If you don't love your neighbor
If you gossip about him, if you never have mercy
If he gets into trouble, and you don't try to help him
Then you don't love your neighbor
And you don't love god
Then you don't love your neighbor
And you don't love god*

Songwriters: SHORTY SULLIVAN, THOMAS COLEY

So, who are your 'Peeps?'" And can you, because of your love for God, respond as Ruth has by claiming to those on the journey, that where you go, I go. Where you lay down, I will lay down. Your Peeps, will be my Peeps. This is where the life of faith leads us, ultimately. And as Anna and I walked down the streets of Boone last Monday I felt an overwhelming love and connection to all those strangers who chose to come and walk together. And in our shared silence there arose a shout to the universe that Love is stronger than hate. That the people of Love will stand together, that no hatred in the world is strong enough to overcome us, that we are one and will continue to walk this life together both in silence and in loud protests. That we show God how much we love her, by loving each other, a sometimes costly and risky thing to do. And I'm wondering if you are ready for the journey? Do you love God with all your heart? How about your mind, your thoughts, your thinking? How about your soul? How about your strength whether that be strength of body or strength of character? Does it make any difference to you?

One character that we've overlooked today is that scribe who had the courage to ask Jesus the question. And I wonder how his life changed after this encounter. You see, as a scribe, he makes his living in the Temple helping with sacrifices and temple business. He probably sees on a regular basis, those who are poor or who are heavily burdened, those who truly cannot afford to give to the maintenance of that Holy place, who are burdened and maybe even excluded, or denied access to God by others. These are his people. I wonder if Jesus' statement to him that "he was not far from the kingdom", gave him pause. Because his own words should have reminded him what it was all about when he said that loving others is more important than all the offerings and sacrifices that he probably helped with day in and day out. I wonder if he changed his mind or decided to follow Jesus. I wonder if his love for God which seemed evident to me opened his heart to a new understanding and vision. Something, as you know, that can happen in the most surprising and unexpected ways.

And this morning we come to this table of Holy Communion. Another place where unexpected things happen. A place where Jesus reminds us again that where you go, he goes. Your people are his people. Where you die, he dies. Where you live, he lives. That Love wins, every time. Over and over and over again. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.