

July 10, 2022 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Love God and One Another

There was nothing else to do, nothing more to say. She had no more tears to cry. Naomi was on her knees in front of the fresh grave of her son, which was right next to grave of her other son, which was right next to the grave of her husband. The four of them moved there ten years earlier. Now, her three men would stay behind as she went back alone. Naomi stood up, brushed the dirt off of her, straightened her back and wiped the tears from her face. She turned around and started walking to Bethlehem. Wheat and barley used to grow in abundance in that city 7 miles south of Jerusalem. That's how Bethlehem got its name. Bethlehem means "House of Bread." Ten years earlier, there was a drought in Judea so, there was no bread in the House of Bread. There was no such thing as welfare, or unemployment, or a stimulus check, yet, Naomi's husband, Elimelech, needed to provide for her and their two sons. They moved to the nation of Moab, about 100 miles away on the eastern side of the Dead Sea, where there was no drought.

It troubled Elimelech that the Moabites did not worship the true God like he and his family did, but they had to eat. When Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, settled in Moab, they did not worship the Moabite god, Chemosh. Elimelech and Naomi resolved that they and their house would serve the Lord. Then, Elimelech died. The two sons – Mahlon and Kilion – took care of their mother. When they brought their girlfriends home to introduce them and discuss marriage, they made sure that they talked about the true God. Orpah and Ruth were glad to hear about the true God. The two couples got married. But then the sons died too!

I hope you never experience the grief and heartache that Naomi felt. She was completely removed from her extended family. She buried her husband and then her two sons. How lonely she must have felt. You know how sad it can be when you are lonely, when it seems as if no one cares about you. You can even feel lonely when you are surrounded with people and activities when people do not understand you or your situation or how you are feeling. Naomi felt that way as she started walking west toward Bethlehem. Her 10 years in Moab had been bitter. She could not provide for herself since women did not hold paying jobs. She heard that the drought in Bethlehem was over, so she decided to move back there. In the Old Testament, God set up an excellent welfare system. The farmers were only allowed to go through their fields once harvesting the wheat and barley. As they were grabbing lots of grain, some would fall to the ground. The people who had fallen on hard times would be allowed to go through the fields and pick up the grain that the farmers had dropped. But Naomi was too old and feeble to spend all day bending over picking up enough grain to make a loaf of

bread. If she made it to Bethlehem alive – with no robbers attacking her – she could only hope that someone would help her.

As Naomi started the long and lonely journey home, her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, walked with her. It was customary to walk a decent distance with someone was leaving you – sort of the way we go out to the driveway to say good-bye to loved ones who are leaving. Could you imagine a more sorrowful scene? Three grieving widows. They loved each other, but it was not logical for Orpah and Ruth to go to Bethlehem with Naomi. She broke the awkward silence and said, "**Go back, each of you, to your mother's home.**" She wished them well and hoped that the Lord would give each of them another husband.

It breaks your heart to hear them crying out loud, "No. We will go back with you to your people." For as much as Naomi loved them, it did not make sense for them to move to Bethlehem. The only options women had then was to get married or to stay in your family's home. Orpah and Ruth did not have any family in Bethlehem. And it was VERY unlikely that an Israelite would marry a Moabite girl, especially one who had already been married. Naomi was too old to have any more sons for them to marry. Even IF she got married again and had two sons, it did not make sense to think that Orpah and Ruth would wait until those boys grew up in order to marry them. For as painful as it was, Naomi told them to go back home.

Orpah agreed and said her tearful good-bye. But Ruth would not leave. For her own good, Naomi even ordered Ruth to return. Ruth took a breath as she looked directly into Naomi's red and swollen eyes and pleaded with her:

"Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay.

Your people will be my people and your God my God.

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

May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." Naomi nodded and the two lonely women started their slow walk to Bethlehem.

The two ladies could not see 100 miles to Bethlehem, but they knew what they were facing. They had no money, no house and no jobs. They were going to be beggars. It was going to be difficult. Since Naomi could not crawl behind the farmers to pick up grain, Ruth knew that she would be doing back-breaking work. Ruth could have returned to Moab and gotten remarried and no one would have blamed her. But Ruth was committed, not just to her mother-in-law, but to the true God. Ruth's words included a confession of faith. She had learned about the true God and the Holy Spirit moved her heart to believe. She did not want to return to her own home and start worshipping the false god of Moab again. She was saying to Naomi, "Your God, the only true God, the only way to heaven, is

and will remain my God too.” Life was going to be tough but she was committed to the true God. Her commitment to the true God also meant that she was committed to Naomi. You see, Naomi needed someone to help her and so Ruth was going to help her. That’s what faith does.

In many ways, Ruth is a symbol for each one of us. There are a number of connections. Ruth was born in a culture and country which did not know the true God. Each one of us came into this world as an unbeliever. We were foreigners to God. We weren’t just held captive to the enemy. We were the enemy. Our sinful nature pushes back against God and doesn’t want him to be the Lord of our life. We want to be the Lord of our lives. For all of our sins of rebellion against God, for our sinful selfishness, we deserved death, eternal death. We were headed for hell, just like Ruth was.

Ruth married Naomi’s son in Moab, and you got married spiritually. Ruth’s husband moved to her country and your spiritual husband, Jesus Christ, came into your world. You did not go looking for Jesus. He came to seek and to save you. Throughout the Bible, Jesus is described as the heavenly bridegroom and the believers, you, are the bride of Christ. When you were baptized you received the name family name of “Christian” just like a bride takes her husband’s name. Jesus Christ poured out his life blood on Calvary’s cross in order to pay for your wedding dress, the robes of righteousness. Jesus wraps his righteousness over your dirty sins and makes it just as if you never sinned. He never gets even with you for the times that you have hurt him. He forgives you and never holds a grudge. He always has time to listen to everything you say and he smiles every time he hears your voice. He always knows what to do. He protects you and provides for all of your needs. He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to prepare the perfect home where you will live with him happily ever after.

Ruth stayed committed to the true God even though it meant a good number of difficulties and hardships. She had to leave behind the family and friends she grew up with. Staying committed to Jesus also means some difficulties and hardships for you. Some of your relatives and friends may also turn away from you because you are walking with Jesus. Think of a beautiful bride on her wedding day marrying the perfect husband. She’s smiling. She couldn’t be happier. She only has eyes for her husband. There is no way that she would leave her husband’s arms and rush toward some other guy who would mistreat her. She’s committed to her husband. And you are committed to your husband, Jesus Christ. Like Ruth walked with Naomi, we are going to walk with Jesus. We are going to follow the path that Jesus has outlined for us in the 10 Commandments. We will be e kind and helpful to others the way that Jesus was kind and helpful to us.

As we saw in this morning’s gospel lesson – The Parable of the Good Samaritan – our neighbor is anyone who needs our help. The Samaritan did not care about the social, ethnic, political and religious differences between the Jews and the Samaritans. All he saw is that the fellow on the side of the road needed help so he stopped and stooped and helped. That’s what faith does. When the Holy Spirit opened the door of your heart, Jesus entered it bringing his holiness and purity with him. But Jesus always brought his lifestyle and attitude in your heart.

If Jesus was physically present in our world today, he would help and heal all those who looked to him. Jesus is not physically present anymore, but through faith, he lives in your heart. Through your hands, your voice, your smile, your touch, your work, Jesus is helping others. What a privilege we have a Christians to be the hands and voice and smile and touch and help of Jesus to those around you – your family and relatives, your co-workers and classmates, your neighbors and others, even those who have hurt you. We do not help others because we HAVE TO as if it was some onerous burden. We show loving kindness to others, just like the Good Samaritan and Ruth, because that’s just what faith does.

These words that Ruth spoke to Naomi are often used as a sermon text for a wedding and that is very fitting. A wedding is a time when a man and woman commit themselves to each other for the rest of their lives no matter what. Husbands and wives can stay committed to each other no matter what because Jesus is committed to them. As Jesus forgives you for all of the sins you have ever committed, husbands and wives can forgive each other for their sins against each other. As we grasp how much Jesus means to us, his love will overflow in our lives to everyone. We will be kind, considerate and forgiving to everyone because Jesus was kind, considerate and forgiving to us.

Ruth did not know how her story was going to end as she started walking with Naomi on that road to Bethlehem. If you read through the rest of this short book in the Bible (It’s only four chapters long. You could read it in 10 minutes.), you’ll see how she met an Israelite man named Boaz who was mature and honest as well as a sincere believer. They got married and the Lord blessed them with a son. Then there was a grandson and on and on until one of their descendants was born in a barn in Bethlehem – Jesus. Jesus is really the main character of this story. It’s all about how Jesus cares for others through his believers lives. Ruth walked down that road with Naomi and ended up enjoying eternal blessings. As we go down the road of life we know that someday soon, we will see our heavenly bridegroom, Jesus Christ. He first loved us, so now we love God and one another. Amen.