

24th Sunday after Pentecost 2018 B
Church of the Advent
November 4, 2018

Even When It's Complicated

It is good to see you here this morning, as we gratefully gather in a place both familiar and dear, to collect ourselves and quiet the noise outside the doors long enough to worship and offer our prayers to God. Prayers of thanksgiving, prayers of praise, prayers of petition and remorse, and prayers of lamentation to our God who we believe has been creating and loving the world for a very long time, and hope will keep on loving-- even when we make a mess of it. At the risk of the thinking of God in *our* own image (rather than us in God's) do you ever wonder what God might be thinking about his creation these days? What must God be thinking about his people for whom he created capacity for freedom and love, creativity and destruction, generosity and selfishness, faith and fear? Does God experience our generation as evolved from our biblical ancestors? Has our way of life, born of ingenuity and creative determination and wrapped in the miracles of modern technology, engineering, medicine, and agriculture, brought us closer to salvation than those whose stories we read from the Bible? I guess the answer to that question is complicated, and has always been complicated--because human beings have always been complicated. We mean well--but not always. We do the best we can with what we've got--but not always. We follow God's commandments and base our laws on them--but not always. It's complicated.

Take the characters in the Book of Ruth--on first reading a romantic story about the relationship between a woman and her mother-in-law. On deeper reflection it is a story about many things: a family broken open by loss whose surviving members become worthless, themes of exile and wilderness, love and loyalty, and the human need for material security--a longing so deep in the human psyche it can lead to exploitation of others to find it.

Ruth, along with her sister in law Orpah, was first of all a Moabite--a foreigner in the eyes of Israelites. Their father-in-law had brought his wife and two sons to Moab to escape the famine in their homeland of Judah. Ruth and Orpah had been married to those sons for years but were barren of children, upon whom birthright ownership of the family's land and holdings would depend. When all the men died, Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi knew she was in trouble, and decided to return to her home country to hopefully find some charitable material support amongst her kin. She encouraged her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab--to go back to their families--and this is what Orpah did. Ruth, however, would not go back; instead she pledged her loyalty to Naomi, *her* kindred and *her* country, saying:

Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

So Ruth and Naomi became two women together on the road, without support, protection or prospects. Two widows--unwelcome and unworthy to claim what had belonged to their men--became refugees looking for a new home. When they arrived back in Bethlehem of Judah, Naomi saw an opportunity for them to be enfolded back into her husband's family, and encouraged Ruth to catch the attention of Boaz, a member of her late husband's family. First Ruth was sent to glean his fields--the left-overs of a harvest intended for the poor to gather so they would not starve. Later Ruth was instructed to seduce Boaz, and after a discussion amongst the family about who might be eligible to marry Ruth to access her late husband's inheritance, Boaz won out and married her. They had a son together who was presented to Naomi as a *restorer of life and nourisher of her old age*. The child was named Obed, and he became the grandfather of King David, and an ancestor of Jesus.

So, a complicated story. A foreign born refugee widow pledges her loyalty to another widow. Both were saved after taking a chance to travel together to a new home that lived in Naomi's dreams. Ruth is then manipulated to seduce a man who eventually creates their material security; fortunately he happens to be a kind man who comes to

love Ruth. And then their son--born of a Moabite woman--takes his place in the ancestral line of Jesus of Nazareth. What was God thinking and doing in this story? Guiding, protecting and blessing the women, for sure, but beyond that, perhaps making a way to keep the heart of Boaz open to something beyond his own material security? Perhaps showing that God's mercy is available to anyone and everyone; that God's eye is truly on the sparrow?

In our story from Mark's gospel today, Jesus is once again confronted by those who made the rules in his day, those who were usually trying to undermine the teachings of Jesus with complicated arguments meant to challenge the way Jesus saw the world as a home for everyone. This time a scribe asked him which is the *greatest* commandment--surely an opening question looking for an opportunity to argue with whichever commandment Jesus might pick. Instead of taking the bait, Jesus answered with the *Shema*. Found in the 6th chapter of the Book of Deuteronomy, the *Shema* remains the most central and important prayer in Judaism:

Hear O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might.

This commandment is so important that it is followed immediately with instructions for God's people to *literally* take this prayer to heart:

Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day.

Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign upon your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead. Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Jews recite this prayer many times a day and some literally wear the prayer written in tiny print and placed in small leather boxes called *phylacteries* which are placed on their left hands and on their foreheads and connected by leather straps wound around the left arm, because it is closer to the heart. The prayer is also placed inside a tiny box, called a

mezuzah, attached to the doorway of each house, meant to be touched coming and going, in and out of the house, as a reminder of their covenant with God.

Jesus adds the second commandment--to love our neighbor as ourselves--from the 19th chapter of the Book of Leviticus, which says:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself; and your neighbor is the alien; or as in the King James Version of the Bible puts it:

And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye shall not vex him. The stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself.

Boaz must have taken those words to heart. He was faithful, and his faithfulness led him to allow his crops to be gleaned by the poor, and to allow a poor Moabite girl and her mother-in-law to be taken in as family. The scribe who confronted Jesus also took those words to heart, agreeing with Jesus and saying that to live them was more important than all the burnt sacrifices they could possibly come up with to impress God.

All well and good we might say, for Bible characters. Ruth and Naomi and Boaz may have had a complicated life, and surely Jesus and his disciples had a complicated life, but that couldn't hold a candle to how complicated our lives are now, right? We *know* too much now--especially about strangers. We are bombarded with warnings about how they can be out to cheat us, to undermine our way of life, to invade and to harm us. Strangers don't think like us, or talk like us, or look like us, so they can't be *real* neighbors, though sometimes they can live right next door. They might want too much--need too much from us; welcoming the stranger might ask more of us than an

annual bag of Halloween candy. It's complicated, we argue; *we* are not responsible for making the world the way it is, so surely *we* can't be held accountable for taking these commandments seriously or literally, because it's complicated.

For followers of Jesus--even those of us living in these complicated times--these commandments still hold water, not just because they are the right thing to do, but because they are the true foundation of joy. They are a clear reminder that love is stronger than hate, love casts out fear, and love by the grace of God gives us the capacity to welcome the stranger. Life is complicated, yet our loving God has given us these commandments as guides on our path to salvation. We hear their promise in the faithfulness of Ruth, in the loving care of Naomi, in the compassion of Boaz, and in the wisdom of a scribe. And we know their power in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. May our God of love inscribe their words on the doorposts of our hearts, and fill us with the courage to make them more than words--even when it's complicated. Amen.