

“The Most You Can Do”

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UCC at The Villages, FL
November 4th, 2012

Ruth 1:1-18

Mark 12:28-34

‘Ruth answered,

“Please don’t tell me to leave you and return home!

I will go where you go, I will live where you live;

your people will be my people, your God will be my God.’ *Ruth 1:16*

Let us pray... O God,

May we live up to our commitments by avoiding unnecessary risks,
yet be willing to do what it takes when we have to.

And may we learn to love – even our enemies, as a grateful response
for your commitment to be with us no matter what.

Amen

There was a video on the Internet this week that showed a little girl tearing up
while her mother asked her why she was crying. She said,

“Bronco Bama and Mitt Romney!”

She was tired of hearing about them – and aren’t we all!

What with all this election year wrangling

along with a catastrophic storm that has ravaged the Eastern Seaboard,
life has been very challenging for many people in our country.

But crises can also serve to bring people together

and regardless of the results next Tuesday, let us keep praying
that we start working together as a nation.

Our scripture lesson today was about such a time of difficulty for one family
in ancient Israel.

Famine had forced Elimelech to take his family to neighboring Moab to seek work,
food, and shelter – despite the fact that Moab had been an enemy of Israel.

In time, he & his wife, Naomi, raised two sons there
and both of them married local girls.

But then, Elimelech died and soon after, both sons as well,

leaving Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth widowed and vulnerable.

When news had come that there had been a good harvest that year in Israel,
Naomi resolved to return to her homeland –

and her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, went with her.

Not far along on the road, Naomi asked her daughters-in-law to reconsider
going with her to what would be a foreign land for them

with its own language and customs.

Willard, p.2

Orpah decided to leave Naomi and tearfully returned to her people –
and there was no shame in that.

It was the practical choice – it made sense,
and going with her mother-in-law, Naomi, as far as she did,
was the most that Orpah could do.

Naomi had given them an out –
it was unselfish on her part to give them that option,
though probably not in her best interests,
but it was the most Naomi could do.

However – to borrow Jesus' phrase about carrying someone else's burden,
Ruth goes the extra mile.

She went beyond blood ties with her culture to 'the tie that binds' hearts together,
such that Naomi was neither an enemy nor a foreigner nor a burden to Ruth.

We can't always go that extra mile out of practical considerations,
but when who we love or what we love is involved,
practicality gives way to fear of what might happen if we *don't* act.

Ruth's name means 'Beloved' and love is what powers any of us
beyond what we perceive are our limitations.

We need to get in touch with who and what we love as a general practice –
especially, to strengthen us for times when things fall apart.

Right now, a lot of people are struggling in Hurricane Sandy's aftermath –
especially NJ, where a friend has told me of widespread destruction
in Atlantic City, Seaside Heights, and Point Pleasant –
with Mantaloking Bridge, boardwalks,
and popular restaurants like Jenkinson's and amusement rides
all gone.

In one central NJ town, many people had gathered at a school library
to recharge their cell phone batteries,
and were interviewed about their plight.

One man said that despite having become used to technology,
he found that, "...we could survive without the electricals."

And a teenager said to compensate for boredom, he and his friends actually,
'...sat around and read books'. Imagine that!

My friend also told me that lines for gas there go for miles,
and when cars cut in front of other cars, this has led to fights.

So, police are having to guard gas stations
and lock people up for disturbing an already disturbed peace.

Willard, p.3

This same friend has made his shower available to people he knows
from his Moose lodge;

And though it may not seem like a big contribution,
when you have gone a week without being able to wash up,
it's a big favor.

There is a limit to what we can do,

but more often than not, that limit is what we *think* we can do.

Love – like adrenaline, helps us go beyond our limitations when needed.

It is the Great Commandment, but it is also the great principle
for how great things get done.

In another storm in another place many years ago,

a tornado tipped over a house

and pushed it 100 yards away from its foundation
with the family still in inside.

Glenda Miller and her son found her mother lying face down,
trapped under a massive, wooden beam.

Her son looked at his grandmother and said, 'She's dead!'

But Glenda – who is all of 5 feet tall, lifted up that beam and tossed it away.

They found her mother wasn't injured at all, just stunned by the event.

The next day, Glenda tried moving that column of wood – and couldn't do it!

When you see a tall building or drive over a bridge,

when you use a cell phone or go to the doctor for an MRI exam,
consider the complexity of our technology.

Think of the devotion and effort it took to make these things possible.

And when they are taken away by such circumstances as a natural disaster,

think of the love God shows us by providing us with the capacity
to pick up the pieces.

It is in when we are *in extremis* – in crisis,

that the worst and the best, are brought forth from us.

And under such circumstances,

it is important to call to mind who and what you love.

It is important to remember what is best in your life and –

as a person of faith, that it all comes from God.

It is important to remember that Jesus said,

'Remember me.'

We are not spared from trouble in this life,

just as Jesus – who is our companion in all that we face, was not spared.

Willard, p.4

Though there is Crucifixion – those times when you feel like crying out,
‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ as Jesus did from the cross,
yet there will also be Resurrection –
a time when people come together to pick up the pieces.

Naomi thought she had lost God’s favor because of all the tragedy in her life,
but the good harvest God provided for Israel,
also provided a blessing for Naomi.

And God’s blessing was also evident in the love that
both her Moabite daughters-in-law showed her –
with Orpah doing the most she could do,
before turning back to her own people;
and with Ruth doing the most she could do
by remaining with Naomi.

The promise Ruth made to Naomi is the promise God makes to us
and echoed in the words of popular singer and Jersey boy, Jon Bon Jovi:

We’ve got to hold on to what we’ve got

‘Cause it doesn’t make a difference if we make it or not.

We’ve got each other, and that’s a lot.

For love, we’ll give it a shot.

We’re halfway there, livin’ on a prayer.

Take my hand and we’ll make it, I swear!

Livin’ on a prayer.

Amen

Our lesson from Ruth 1:1-18, is a classic text often used in marriage ceremonies, that describes a heartfelt commitment between two people...

Before Israel was ruled by kings,

Elimelech from the tribe of Ephrath lived in the town of Bethlehem.

His wife was named Naomi, and their two sons were Mahlon and Chilion.

But when their crops failed, they moved to the country of Moab.

And while they were there, Elimelech died,

leaving Naomi with only her two sons.

Later, Naomi's sons married Moabite women.

One was named Orpah and the other Ruth.

About ten years later, Mahlon and Chilion also died.

Now Naomi had no husband or sons.

When Naomi heard that the Lord had given his people a good harvest,

she and her two daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab and go to Judah.

As they were on their way there, Naomi said to them,

“Don't you want to go back home to your own mothers?

You were kind to my husband and sons,

and you have always been kind to me.

I pray that the Lord will be just as kind to you.

May he give each of you another husband and a home of your own.”

Naomi kissed them. They cried and said,

“We want to go with you and live among your people.”

But she replied,

“My daughters, why don't you return home?

What good will it do you to go with me?

Do you think I could have more sons for you to marry?

You must go back home, because I am too old to marry again.

Even if I got married tonight and later had more sons,

would you wait for them to become old enough to marry?

No, my daughters! Life is harder for me than it is for you,

because the Lord has turned against me.”

They cried again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye,

but Ruth held on to her. Naomi then said to Ruth,

“Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and to her gods!

Why don't you go with her?”

Ruth answered,

“Please don't tell me to leave you and return home!

I will go where you go, I will live where you live;

your people will be my people, your God will be my God.

I will die where you die and be buried beside you.

May the Lord punish me if we are ever separated, even by death!”

When Naomi saw that Ruth had made up her mind to go with her,

she stopped urging her to go back.

Mark 12:28-34 [RSV]

[28] And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

[29] Jesus answered,

"The first is, `Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one;

[30] and 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.'

[31] The second is this,

`You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

There is no other commandment greater than these."

[32] And the scribe said to him,

"You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that he is one,

and there is no other but he;

[33] and 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,

is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

[34] And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him,

"You are not far from the kingdom of God."

And after that no one dared to ask him any question.