

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Love Embodied”
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Lessons: Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34

The story of Jesus and the Scribe presents one of the foundational realities for followers of Jesus. Which commandment is first of all? Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and will all your mind, and will all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these. Love God, with everything that you are—heart, soul, mind and strength—and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Use this two-fold commandment to test the way we live and the ways we interpret our Scriptures and theology. No less a figure than St. Augustine recognized that if our interpretation of Scripture is not built on this double love of God and neighbor then our interpretation is wrong. These two commandments offer the foundation for all our theology, for our law, for our everyday living.

God’s love, and our love for God, aren’t some vague, ethereal, philosophical idea. God’s love and our love for God are made concrete, real, alive, in our relationships, in our love for each other. One of the ways to demonstrate our love for God is by loving our neighbors and that is wonderfully demonstrated in the story of Ruth and Naomi.

Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi are both widows. Naomi was an Israelite and Ruth was a foreigner from Moab. Moab is not simply the wrong side of the tracks, it is an enemy of Israel, yet this foreign woman demonstrates steadfast love in her devotion to her mother in law. Ruth, the outsider, the alien, the immigrant, made real for Naomi, the child of Israel, the love of God. In many ways the Book of Ruth is a critique of the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah who tried to purify Israel in the days following the return from exile.¹ They tried to cement Israel’s ethnic identity by casting out foreign wives and infants. Against that backdrop, Ruth is a foreign wife and widow who turns out to be the savior of the nation. Instead of deporting foreigners, the Book of Ruth suggests that those very foreigners may be exactly what the people need. As the great grandmother of Israel’s greatest king, King David, and as Matthew explains the ancestor of Jesus, she turns out to be a savior for the nation.

This is a story we need to hear today. In the midst of all kinds of talk and action about immigrants and the supposed danger they pose to our nation today, Ruth offers us another perspective. We are so busy building walls, locking up children, and expressing incredible fear of people from south of the border that we may be keeping the likes of Ruth from saving our nation. The gospel proclaims that foreigners are not people to be feared, but rather neighbors to be loved. They might turn out to be angels as Abraham discovered. They might be the ones to save us all, as Ruth turned out to be. As followers of Jesus who desire to love God, we can demonstrate our love for God in the ways we express our love for our neighbors, native and foreign born. Some of you will remember the words attributed to Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out—
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!
How might we be drawing inclusive welcoming circles in our divided world today?

¹ Kathleen M. O’Connor, Theological Perspective, Proper 26 in Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. © 2009

Ruth also offers some of the most powerful words of steadfast love and loyalty when she responds to Naomi's suggestion that she simply stay in Moab: Ruth will have none of it. She is the best kind of friend you could ever ask for. "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. Where 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!"

Not even death will separate Ruth from Naomi. Ruth understood that God's love does not end with death; neither does God's love as it is expressed in our own loving relationships. That's what we celebrate today on this All Saints' Sunday. God's love that we have known in so many people who have died, lives on in our midst. Those relationships with our best beloved don't end because someone has died. They carry on through all eternity.

Frederick Buechner speaks of this continuing communion of the saints: "How they do live on, those giants of our childhood, and how well they manage to take even death in their stride because although death can put an end to them right enough, it can never put an end to our relationship with them. Wherever or however else they may have come to life since, it is beyond a doubt that they live still in us. Memory is more than a looking back to a time that is no longer; it is a looking out into another kind of time altogether where everything that ever was continues not just to be, but to grow and change with the life that is in it still. The people we loved. The people who loved us. The people who, for good or ill, taught us things. Dead and gone though they may be, as we come to understand them in new ways, it is as though they come to understand us—and through them we come to understand ourselves—in new ways too. Who knows what 'the communion of saints' means, but surely it means more than just that we are all of us haunted by ghosts because they are not ghosts, these people we once knew, not just echoes of voices that have years since ceased to speak, but saints in the sense that through them something of the power and richness of life itself not only touched us once long ago, but continues to touch us. They have their own business to get on with now, I assume—'increasing in knowledge and love of Thee', says the Book of Common Prayer, and moving from 'strength to strength,' which sounds like business enough for anybody—and one imagines all of us on this shore fading for them as they journey ahead toward whatever new shore may await them; but it is as if they carry something of us on their way as we assuredly carry something of them on ours. That is perhaps why to think of them is a matter not only of remembering them as they used to be but of seeing and hearing them as in some sense they are now. If they had things to say to us then, they have things to say to us now too, nor are they by any means always things we expect or the same things."² Not even death can part us from the love of God we have known in the love of people.

Here around this table we celebrate with all the saints, those who have gone before and those who are yet to come. There is room for everyone here; people who were born here and people from foreign places who might be bringing saving grace. It is here around this table where, for a moment, we are given a glimpse, of that better, brighter world to come, where all are fed, and where tears and sorrow, and death will be no more. Here at this table we encounter God's love which we can discover in loving others.

Let us pray: Eternal God, neither death nor life can separate us from your love. Grant that we may serve you faithfully here on earth, and in heaven rejoice with all your saints who ceaselessly proclaim your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

² Frederick Buechner, *The Sacred Journey: A Memoir of Early Days*. Harper Collins © 1982