**Ruth 1:1-18**

In 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.

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I love the story of Ruth. It is one of my favorite stories in all the scriptures. And the line “Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. “ is one of my favorite lines. I think I have always been drawn to the story of Ruth because its two main characters, the heroines, or saints, are strong women. I also like this story because it says that family is who you make it. The bond of this mother and daughter-in-law is as strong, or stronger, than the bond even of mother and daughter. Even after the death of the man who connects their relationship. These two women chose to stay in relationship to one another.

A few things in the story might be a bit confusing so I want to unpack a little of the story with you so we can enjoy it even more.

First of all Naomi, which means pleasant, and her husband Elimelech, which means, "My God is King” are refugees. The leave Bethlehem, literally translated house of bread, because there is a famine, or no bread. I seriously doubt they were the only ones who left because of the famine. Famine means so much more than no food, it also means no work, no money, no opportunity, and often violence erupts over the sparse resources. Famine is the primary cause of groups of humans moving from one place to another throughout history. And so a large group, a caravan of refugees leaves their home, because they just can not stay. There is nothing for them there. They are without hope in their home, and so they must follow the only sliver of hope they can see, into a new land. Many, including Naomi and Elimelech flee the famine to Moab where they settle and raise their children.

Naomi’s children are named it seems by a woman living through the worst of times, through a famine-Chilion and Mahlon. Chilion means “wasting away”, and Mahlon means “sickly". These are names given in Bethlehem, by a mother who is without hope. And so Elimelech takes his little desperate family to Moab. Unfortunately, In the course of time, Elimelech, the father, dies, leaving Naomi with two sons. They take for themselves wives from the community in which they live; Ruth and Orpah. (Not Oprah, a famously misspelled name.)Then Chilion and Mahlon also die, well we saw that coming didn’t we.

So now the three women are left alone. Eventually Naomi hears that the famine has ended in Bethlehem and decides to return to her homeland. No doubt she had family and friends there still and her prospects seem better for a secure life there. At first the three women plan to travel to Bethlehem together. But before they get far down the road. Naomi has a change of heart. How can she ask these young women to come with her. She has no more sons for them to marry and no prospects of ever having sons.

Now that seems very odd to us. But we must try to understand the Leverite marriage codes which would have been in play at the time. If a man died, his widow becomes the wife of his next closest brother. Furthermore, the brother is obligated to try to impregnate the widow with a son, so he can inherit in his fathers name what would have been rightly his fathers. Remember the woman, the widow, could generally not inherit on her own. Now if the next brother of the dead man is still a child, the widow is required to wait for that one to come of age before she is given in marriage to him. And this is what Naomi is worried about when she tries to send the women back to their own parents. She has no hope of ever having sons to fulfill this obligation to the women. And so she pleads with them both to return to their homes and to try to find husbands for themselves from among their community. It sounds very strange to us, but it was normal in those days, and we just have to go with it.

Orpah sees the wisdom in what Naomi is saying and reluctantly returns to her home. But Ruth is insistent on remaining with Naomi, of going with Naomi. And so the two women are forever bound one to the other, not through marriage or legal arrangements any longer, but through love and friendship. Family in the truest sense of the word.

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

In our gospel message this morning Jesus tells the scribe that the greatest, first, most important commandment is Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul, mind, and strength. And this is what Ruth is promising to do. Your God will be my God.

Jesus also says love your neighbor as yourself. Now at a different time the one who asks challenges Jesus’ very traditional citing of Love your neighbor as yourself by insisting on a definition of Neighbor. But in todays account, this is not so. The Scribe merely agrees with Jesus, and adds that to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices one could make at the temple. Therefore, Jesus tells him that he is in fact very close to the kingdom of God, because he is beginning to get it. He has understanding.

The story of Ruth and Naomi asks the question, “Who is my family?” but it also asks the question “Who is my neighbor?” The fleeing refugees are accepted into the community in Moab and eventually the sons marry women of the community. Likewise, Ruth and Naomi venture back to Bethlehem together, they too will be welcomed into the community, even though Ruth is a Moabite, a foreigner, a stranger in a strange land.

These two stories blend together to show us that the most important thing is Loving God, and our neighbors as ourself. Love not just those you are legally obligated or expected to love. But love those who can’t even do anything for you. Love those who are refugees or strangers. Love those who are down on their luck, looking for a new beginning or a better future. We are called to reach out to them with welcome, and include them in the blessed community, When we do that, we will be not far from he Kingdom of God. Amen

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