

# Love's Persistence

Ruth 1:1-18

Mark 12:28-34

“For All the Saints”, which we will sing at the close of the service today, is a beautiful hymn. It puts us in touch with the grief and sadness we feel over those we have lost to death, but does so with a melody that is uplifting, comforting, and reassuring. “For all the saints, who from their labors rest”. I am a little puzzled by that second phrase though, “who from their labors rest.” The hymn’s author, Episcopalian Bishop William How, apparently shared the popular notion that what awaits us in the life to come is leisure, comfort, long naps.

But, if the Bishop was hoping that life after death meant endless rounds of golf with St. John, fishing with St. Peter, or one concert after the other as David plays his harp, I am afraid the Bishop discovered quite quickly that heaven is anything but a place of rest. On the contrary, it is my guess that one of the first things one does after walking through those pearly gates is get signed up for a committee or as we like to call them ministry teams. I hope I am not disappointing you with this news, especially if your picture of heaven is something more like a Caribbean Cruise.

As John Dominic Crossan and other Biblical scholars make clear, resurrection from the dead evolved out of the belief that

human suffering and injustice is less powerful than the persistence of God's love. Even when saints are persecuted and killed, there is reason for hope because love is at work, which, of course means, when you die and walk through those pearly gates, St. Peter will be signing up you for a ministry team.

Love after all is hardly a word of leisure. Love has legs; it gets you up and moving to wherever there is need. Love has a voice, refusing to be silent when a word needs to be spoken. Love has arms, reaching out with compassion. In our Gospel today when Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment, he responds without hesitation, "Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and all your mind." It is a fully embodied love. The second commandment says Jesus is just like the first, "love your neighbor as yourself." This is love with legs, love with a voice, love with arms. As Jesus makes abundantly clear, it is love that becomes flesh. The closer one gets to the source of love, the more active and engaged one becomes in living out that love. The saints are hard at work.

If anyone is in need of love with legs, it is Naomi, Ruth and Orpah. They have been hit by devastation that none of them would have anticipated. Death and destruction is all around this story. Pictures are unable to capture the loss they feel. The three men in their lives are all dead. Naomi's husband, her two sons, the

husbands of Ruth and Orpah, dead. Living in a patriarchal world in which women are completely dependent on men, the three women have more than grief to consider; they also face an extremely uncertain future.

Naomi knows that there is a huge question whether Ruth and Orpah will be accepted by her people back in Jerusalem. They are, after all Moabite women. One of the ongoing debates among the Israelites had to do with identity, who is a part of the community. Biblical prophets such as Ezra and Nehemiah saw outsiders with their alien gods as a threat and so they advocated a closed door policy. They want voter I.D. for anyone wishing to join their ranks. Naomi knows Ruth and Orpah have no such I.D. and so, even though she can barely imagine one more loss, out of love Naomi encourages her daughter-in-laws to go back to their families.

Orpah does so. There is no reason to see Orpah's response as anything other than honoring the love that Naomi has shown. But, love when it is at work and on the move can be unpredictable, finding a new path, an alternate direction, a different way for love to be worked out. Ruth insists that voter I.D. or no voter I.D. she will be returning with Naomi. Love has a voice. Love has legs. Love has arms. Love is persistent.

The challenges we face in our own personal lives, the challenges we face as a community and the challenges confronting the world, can feel overwhelming. What can be done about the unending conflict in the mid-East, economic inequity, disparity in pay for women, immigration, violence in our cities, racial injustice, climate change? It is easy to feel nothing will ever change. Sometimes, like Naomi, who felt abandoned by God, we are tempted to just give up ourselves. But, then along comes someone like Ruth, who does nothing more than be by our side, share the uncertainty of what lies ahead, and remind us we are not alone. Love is persistent and we are called to share in that persistence.

One of the passages most often read at weddings is this passage in which Ruth proclaims her deep love and faithfulness to Naomi. “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

On this All Saints Sunday what is particularly striking is what Ruth says next, “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!” Although Ruth lives in a time in which the theology of resurrection has yet to be developed, she is nonetheless convinced that death is no match for the power of love at work in our lives and in our world.

We are reminded today that those we call saints, who have shown us the meaning of love, are among us and they are rolling up their sleeves. They are helping us find our voice, offering us confidence to speak out. They give strength to our legs as we put love into action. The saints encourage us to reach out and welcome those who feel excluded and unwelcome. The saints empower us as a community to be advocates and agitators for justice. The saints are closer than ever to the source of love and they are here with us inviting us to claim that power.

They are on committees. They are on ministry teams. They are working for God's love and justice. Ruth is here. Naomi is here. Oprah is here. All the saints who have you shown you the meaning and power of love are here. It is getting crowded in this sanctuary. Jesus, the great, great, great grandchild of a Moabite woman, lacking proper ID is here, calling us to love with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our mind. The power of persistent love is ours and nothing can defeat that love.

## **Ruth 1:1-18**

*Our first lesson tells the story of an Israelite family who because of a famine leave their home in Bethlehem and travel to the land of Moab. Initially everything is fine, but in time the father dies, followed by their two married sons. They leave behind Naomi, the mother and her daughter-in-laws Ruth and Naomi. This is a story about how these women respond to this tragedy. It also is a story about a bigger argument among the people of Israel as to who is included and who is excluded. The story of Ruth comes down on the side of love and inclusion.*

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. The 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. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These 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, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then 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. So 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. But 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. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But 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? Turn 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, would 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." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But 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.  
 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!"

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

### **Mark 12:28-34**

*Our second lesson provides the familiar response Jesus gives to the question, which is the greatest commandment. When the person asking the question, affirms the wisdom of love being the core of God's revelation, Jesus says "you are very close to the Realm of God."*

One 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?" Jesus answered, "The first is, '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 with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; 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,' — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When 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.