

ONE MORE QUESTION

Ruth 1: 1-18; Mark 12: 28-34

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time • October 31, 2021

by Pat Berger

The past two Sundays, our readings from the Gospel according to Mark have told us of times when Jesus asked those around him, what do you want me to do for you? James and John wanted favored positions in the life to come (Jesus told them they might want to rethink that question); Bartimaeus last week wanted to see again (and Jesus granted him his sight, immediately, and won a new follower). Today, one of the scribes happens on a conversation -- likely a LOUD conversation, since Mark calls it a "dispute" -- Jesus was having with his disciples, and the scribe invites himself in. He saw that Jesus was holding his own in the dispute, so asked a question of his own: "Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus' answer, Mark allows us to overhear, was: "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.' . . ."

The way that we are to love God is different from the way that we are to love our neighbor and ourselves. We are to give ourselves entirely to God. The beloved children were shown first in the covenant with Israel and then with the gift of Jesus that God's love for us is boundless and unconditional and for every one of the children, and we are to love God in that very same way. We show our love for God by accepting God's love for us, and by our actions that demonstrate that we know we are loved.

We love our neighbor for a slightly different reason: we love our neighbor because God loves our neighbor. And remember that "neighbor" refers to more than the one who lives next door or across the street. In this context, "neighbor" refers to every other person everywhere. Not all of our neighbors exhibit traits that make us feel lovingly toward them; not all of our neighbors are inclined to love us back. And yet: because God loves our neighbor, it is essential that

we act in love toward that neighbor. And we love the neighbor, "as we love ourselves." We know when we are taking care of ourselves well, and when we may have over-stepped into pride or self-interest. It is necessary for us to act in love toward ourselves, as it is to act in love toward our neighbor -- because we are God's beloved children.

It is interesting to have this story in our heads as we think about our verses from the Book of Ruth. One of the commentators wrote that, "The theological ground of today's reading from Ruth is a God of fierce inclusivity . . ." -- must be the same God as is at work in Mark's Gospel! At the time that this book was written, there was a government reform happening. A part of that was an effort to purify Israel by ridding it of all foreign wives and children of mixed ethnic background. Ruth is a foreigner, who by her actions not only showed great love but also served as a savior for the nation.

Ruth and Orpah had married the sons of Elimelech and Naomi. By the end of the first paragraph of our reading, all three men had died. We remember that at that time, women who were widows were at extreme risk, especially if they did not have sons to support them, as Ruth and Orpah at least did not. About the only reasonable thing for them to do would have been to return to their fathers' homes. Somehow, these two, at least at first, determined not to do that but rather to remain with Naomi -- who was also a widow and at risk. Perhaps they thought Naomi would be safer or better cared for if the younger women were with her, or perhaps it was more difficult to go back to their own country -- we aren't told. Eventually, Naomi told them they ought to leave her, and soon Orpah did that, but Ruth stayed. Ruth vowed to remain with Naomi even beyond death -- certainly this is an example of love of neighbor. The outsider is the faithful one here, and when we look at the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel we see that Ruth is mentioned there, which makes Jesus, as Kathleen O'Connor wrote, ". . . the offspring of mixed race and ancestry of dubious reputation. Jesus' own genealogy is a theological statement that includes the nations, the enemies of Israel, the excluded ones."

Fortunately for the scribe, he seemed to have been impressed with Jesus' response to his question. And Jesus, in turn, seemed to have been impressed with the scribe. He told the scribe that he was not far from the Kingdom, and then: no one else dared to ask any more questions.

This is the day on the church calendar when we celebrate Reformation Day. The reformers lived in difficult times, and they weren't made easier by their efforts to reform the church. Women, especially, in Ruth's time lived difficult lives, too, and it seems as if Ruth was one of the reformers then. Jesus, too, spent a good bit of time reforming those around him. And we could think about our own time, particularly the past year and a half. When will we get to worship without masks again? Or have coffee and goodies and chat time after worship? We have done a fair amount of re-forming ourselves in these past months. Worship has been recorded, coffee time has been online, meetings and classes have been online. And we are headed into more reforming: Pastor David has retired, and we are about to enter into what is often an intense time of reformation in the life of a church: we are beginning the search for the one who will be the next pastor of Plymouth Presbyterian Church. It may not always be fun -- or perhaps it will be. When we remember those two commandments, though: "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." And: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We know: God loves us, we love God, we love our neighbor because God loves our neighbor. I wonder what kind of reforming we will have done by this time next year.

Let us pray.