

November 22, 2020

“May We Show Kindness to One Another”

(Ruth 1:6-22)

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Do you know how many miles a runner has to travel to complete a marathon? It is exactly 26. 219 miles. Do you have an idea at what time during the marathon a runner struggles the most to continue the race? Depending on a runner’s condition, it is said that runners’ bodies reach their physical limits between the 18 and 23-mile marks. At this most challenging stage of the marathon, runners’ physical strength begins to wane, they become exhausted, and they feel like giving up on the race. (Slide 1) This time is described as “hitting the wall”. During this time, runners struggle with themselves mentally. What is important at this moment is to hope that the finish line is just around the next corner and to remain confident that they can finish the race.

Last week, we had a good news report that another vaccine, which is being developed by the pharmaceutical company Moderna, is 94 % effective in preventing the virus infection and will be available in a few months. Since mid-March, we have been forced to run the pandemic marathon race. As we think about where we are now in this race, we could say we are at the most challenging miles or “hitting the wall”. We have become tired and exhausted mentally, physically, and relationally. Now, we have to run the rest of this race spiritually, hoping that the vaccine will be available very soon, and doing our part for the safety of other people, as well as ourselves. (slide 2) To finish this race together, we need to encourage and support one another.

Last Wednesday night, we had an Administrative Council meeting in response to the ministerial message of Bishop Bard. He recommended that all local churches in Michigan replace in-person worship with on-line services during the Advent and Christmas season to lessen the virus’s spread and to protect the church families. We discussed that issue for our local church setting. Acknowledging that in-person worship is so meaningful to our church family, we have decided to continue with sanctuary worship, while strictly keeping the basic safety guidelines like wearing face masks and maintaining the minimum social distance. We will continue to monitor any developments at the local and nationwide levels and respond accordingly. Please keep the basic rules of safety before, during, and after our worship service. And for those who want to worship on-line using Facebook, we have now installed an enhanced camera and audio system to upgrade our video and audio quality. We will also be recording the service and offering DVD copies for those who could not attend either in-person or have access to a computer and the internet. We will do our best to allow each of you to be a part of our Sunday worship experience.

It will not take long for us to get out of the dark tunnel of the pandemic. In the meanwhile, we should be doing positive things in our daily lives. In today's scripture, we can gain spiritual wisdom from Naomi and Ruth about how we can take positive steps forward during this pandemic and overcome the difficulties we may be facing. In addition, we can challenge ourselves to understand the plan that God has for each of us.

(Slide 3) First of all, let's think about the important decisions Naomi and Ruth made for one another. When Naomi heard that the Lord had come to his people's aid by providing food and they thought it better for them to return to Bethlehem, she had to decide if she should bring her two daughters-in-law with her. Because Naomi was an older widow who had lost her husband and two sons (1:12), she realized that she needed someone who could help her. She could not afford to provide for herself on her

own. She needed Orpah and Ruth. No one would blame her if she brought her daughters-in-law to Jerusalem.

However, Naomi thought that doing that would not be good for Orpah and Ruth's future lives. (Slide 4) She gave up her self-interest and selfish thoughts for their sakes. She urged them to return to the homes of their mothers in Moab, blessing them that God might show them kindness as they had shown kindness to their husbands and to her, and that God would bless them with new husbands who would provide them with homes and security (1:8-9). She did not want to be an obstacle to their future as they started a new chapter in their lives. Her deep concern and caring love for Orpah and Ruth was so beautiful.

Let's think about the decision Ruth made for her future. Unlike Orpah, who decided to return to her mother's home in Moab, Ruth chose to follow her mother-in-law for the rest of her life. *"Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."* (1:16-17) She wanted to be with Naomi in all situations at any cost. Nothing could stop her from following Naomi.

Did she have any idea what would happen to her as she made her decision to follow her mother-in-law? Why do you think she made that decision? Was it her faith? I think it was Ruth's deep love for Naomi that made her sacrifice herself for Naomi's sake. (Slide 5) We need to look at verse 8 again. *"May the Lord show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me."* Here, the term, 'kindness' comes from the Hebrew word, 'hesed,' which means divine 'love' and 'loyalty.' Paul Miller in his Book, *A Living Life*, defines hesed love as "covenant love, committed love; an act of the will to love another regardless of response." Naomi thought Ruth manifested to her family divine love and loyalty. It would be no exaggeration to say that Ruth's hesed love made her decide to remain with Naomi for the rest of her life.

(Slide 6) Both Naomi and Ruth had mutual respect and love for one another, giving up their self-interest and desires and feeling accountable (sacrificial) to one another. It meant a lot to each of them and eventually made both of them stay together at their hardest time. Hesed love made beautiful things happen in their current lives of suffering and in their future.

What do you think of their mutual, beautiful, sacrificial love? Do you think that only a few exceptional people can make this exquisite love happen in their lives? Do you think you are not that kind of person? In that case, I want you to realize that the love they showed to one another is the same love that we, as brothers and sisters in Christ, have to live out in our lives, especially during the most challenging times of crises.

I ask you to think about and do your part in building up our faith community on the firm foundations of hesed love, respect, loyalty, and sacrifice. Start with what you can do, not waiting for others to take the lead. Acting out your love for other family members in our faith community can be contagious and spread to others.

(Slide 7) Significantly, the pandemic is a good time for us to live out the life of hesed love. In getting through the pandemic, everyone has many difficulties like depression, anxiety, fear, loneliness, anger, and stress, as well as financial problems and family issues. We all need to be supported by one another. Let's start by doing small things. Let's share something within us with those who might need our time, thoughts, heart, faith, money, gifts, wisdom, and experience. I invite all of you to experience the power of hesed love in your lives. Let's discover those who are not close to us and reach out to them. At first,

it won't be easy, but we should go beyond that to experience the beautiful things that will happen in our relationships and our lives.

(Slide8) The second thing I would like you to focus on is Naomi and Ruth's faith in God. Both women showed the depth of their faith in times of suffering. Since Naomi was a Jew and had had faith in God throughout her life, we can assume that she would have a stronger faith in God during extreme situations of crisis and suffering.

However, under extreme hardship, she seemed to express doubt and bitterness regarding her faith in God. She thought her sufferings came from God's judgment. (Slide 9) *"It is more bitter for me than for you, because **the Lord's hand has turned against me!**"* (Verse 13), "The Lord has afflicted me. The Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." (verse21) For her, it was God who made all of the miserable things happen to her family, even though she didn't fully understand why God had done so. She couldn't escape her thinking that God had abandoned her family. To some degree Naomi must have experienced complex feelings of disappointment, resentment, and despair.

Unlike Naomi, Ruth showed a much different kind of faith in God, who might still be unfamiliar to her. She, a Moabite woman and a pagan, only started to believe in God since her marriage to one of Naomi's sons. She had little knowledge and experience of what God was like and she might have thought that God was either uncaring or indifferent to the deaths of Naomi's, Opah's, and her husbands or that God was incapable of protecting them from death. I think she had no reason to believe and follow God. God might not have been attractive to Ruth. Regardless, she decided to choose God as her Lord. (Slide 10) *"**Your** people will be my people and **your** God my God. Where **you** die, I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separate you and me."* (verse 16-17)

Ruth was not perfect in her faith. She had little experience in encountering God. Regardless, she was courageous in having faith in God. She must have thought it was worthy of her to have the same faith in God, that she had observed in her mother-in-law Naomi.

It is impressive to see how differently Naomi and Ruth responded to God as they faced the same crises and sufferings. Naomi failed to stand firm in her faith as she was faced with many difficulties, even though she had known God all of her life. Ruth showed well what our faith should be like all of the time, though she had little experience in encountering God.

In terms of our faith in God, (slide11) which woman's faith, Naomi's or Ruth's, describes your faith? Through Naomi, we can see what makes us lose our faith in God. When we expect God to customize His love for our worldly expectations and satisfaction and we think God cannot or will not meet our expectation, then we can easily doubt God's power and love and distance ourselves from God. Through Ruth, we realize that faith must be genuine. She showed total trust amid her crises and sufferings.

Through Naomi, we can examine our own weaknesses in faith and through Ruth we can see clearly what we have to do to remain strong in our faith. When Naomi was facing life situations of suffering, she stopped trusting in God, while Ruth made use of that situation as the opportunity to trust God.

Any difficulties in our life, including the pandemic, can be either stepping stones for our faith or stumbling blocks creating disbelief. It is evident to all of us which way we should take and follow.

(Slide 12) The last thing I would like you to focus on is the people God chooses to complete His plan of salvation. Can you find out in the scripture today that God was working through these women? There is

no direct mention of it, but we know that God was acting out His plan of salvation through Naomi and Ruth's lives. For me, it is so surprising to see the unlikely people that God chooses to make His plan of salvation complete.

Think about what kind of persons Naomi and Ruth were at that time. Naomi was an older widow, who had lost her husband and two sons and was living a bitter life. She had no material resources, so she couldn't survive financially by herself. Ruth was a Moabite woman who had to experience social and religious prejudice and discrimination over her ethnicity if she chose to live with Naomi in Bethlehem. No one would pay attention to the resulting family, a combination of an old widow and a pagan young widow. (Slide 13) They were poor, vulnerable, marginalized, social outcasts. No one could imagine that God would work through these two women to further His story of salvation through their lives.

However, they were God's people, who were chosen to make His puzzle of salvation complete. In God's view, no qualifications were needed. Their social status, gender, age, faith, ethnicity, job, or religious experience did not matter. By God's grace they were chosen. God chooses people whom no one can imagine to be the right people for making the most extraordinary things happen in our history.

What do you think of yourself? Or, what do think of the people around you? According to the worldly standards of social status, material possessions, academic or career status, we may not see ourselves as important or the best people for making God's salvation complete, and give up on ourselves or those around us.

However, let us be reminded that God would like to work through us, even if we are vulnerable and struggling with difficult issues in life. Let's rest on the hope that God has already started His plan for salvation through the lives of each of us. We should be able to see ourselves and others as the right people to help complete God's salvation puzzle.

I want to summarize the three challenges for each of us from today's scripture:

- (slide 14) We, as a church, should show mutual love, accountability, and sacrifice to one another.
- (slide 15) We should be courageous in faith in God and His faithfulness in caring for us, especially in times of crisis and suffering.
- (slide 16) We should be reminded that we are the right people who God would like to work through and to use in making His story of salvation complete.

We are traveling through the pandemic's dark tunnel, but we will soon escape this tunnel. What if Naomi and Ruth had known what God was preparing for their future as they returned to Bethlehem? They would have enjoyed their journey to Bethlehem, not feeling burdened or anxious or fearful.

Fortunately, we have a good idea about what will happen in our lives in a few months. Though we don't know for sure how God has prepared us for our future during this pandemic, we believe God is working for us. Just as God planned and prepared beautiful things for Naomi and Ruth's future, so God is doing the same things for us at this time of crisis.

Thanksgiving Day is coming. Let's be thankful to God, who has been faithful and will be in caring and working for us behind the scenes while we have been getting through the pandemic.