

Sermon for June 30 and July 1, 2018 Ruth 2:1-23  
First Lutheran Church, Aitkin, Minnesota  
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Dear Friends in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen

It's said that you can make numbers prove anything you want. For instance, numbers will show that I have eleven fingers. On my right hand, my little finger is number ten, next is number 9 and down to my thumb which is number six. Then add the five I have on my left hand to those six and I have eleven, right?

It's also said that you can make the Bible prove anything you want it to. Attorney General Jeff Sessions used Paul's letter to the Romans, Chapter 13 to show why the administration needed to have a very strict policy on illegal immigration at our southern border and it was following the law to separate children from their parents. He quoted St. Paul who said that laws come from God and they therefore need to be followed. At the same time, Jeff Sessions didn't continue reading verses 8-10, where Paul seems to be saying that laws need to be seasoned or flavored by love. That to love you neighbor as yourself is the fulfillment of the law. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, Paul says.

Laws are a part of God's will and they are made to help keep order. Luther would go on to say that laws are fences to keep the sinful self in check, from running wild in society. But laws without the seasoning of love are missing important elements of what God wants for us.

Our scripture today is an example of this: Our scripture today and the whole book of Ruth, according to the law should not be read nor even be in the Bible. It has no place according to Deuteronomy 23:3-6. There we learn that no Ammonites or Moabites shall be admitted to the assembly of God—God's people. They did not give food or water to the Israelites when they came from Egypt. They hired Balaam to curse them. Therefore you shall not promote their welfare or prosperity as long as you live. Pretty clear, in black and white that Moabites were to be forever shunned. Ruth is a Moabite! Nothing good was to be done for her. So why do we have this book in our Bible? It shouldn't be here, it is against the law!

There may be two explanations for its inclusion and they depend on when Ruth was written. Scholars aren't sure when Ruth was written. They think it was either in the time before the kings in the time of the judges or after the Jews return from their Babylonian captivity. Let's look at the first option.

Ruth is a story of love and devotion in everyday life. Elimelech of Bethlehem, his wife and two sons went to Moab during a famine. Elimelech dies there, his sons marry Moabite wives and the sons also die. So Naomi, his wife decides to return home. Her daughters in law say they will go also. She discourages them but Ruth persists. We see her love and devotion to her mother in law. They return to Bethlehem, are poor and Ruth

volunteers to go glean in the fields. This is hot, hard work, bending over all day to pick up heads and stalks of grain that are left behind from the men cutting the field. This is love, doing what needs to be done. The owner of the field, Boaz, recognizes Ruth as a new person. He finds that Ruth has been good to Naomi and gives Ruth permission to follow the reapers, drink from their water vessels, eat with him and the reapers at noon. Boaz demonstrates love in everyday life in the hot fields of harvest.

The long story short is that Boaz marries Ruth and they have a child named Obed and he is the grandfather of King David. This story may tell not only how love is to be lived out in everyday life in the midst of loss, grief, transition in living, finding a way to survive in a new country, but also tells of good people living and caring for one another. It tells of God operating with and through people's love to bring about God's will. It may also show how King David had good ancestors that helped make him who he was. That may be why this story is in the Holy Scriptures.

A second possibility is that this story was written after the Jewish captives came back from exile in Babylon in 518 B.C. In 586 B.C. the Babylonian Empire captured, destroyed Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and took many of the people as captive slaves to Babylonia. The Jews in time began to realize that God had given them up to their choices: they had trusted in their king more than the Lord; they had not lived out God's will; they had believed that their military alliances would save them. God had sent prophets to get them to repent and they refused. So defeat was God's will for them.

In captivity, they decided they had to listen to God's Word. In fact they decided they had to follow it literally, legalistically, to the letter. They decided they needed to shut themselves off from other nations. They had to look only at doing God's will and put blinders on their eyes, keeping to themselves. One result of this was that men began to divorce foreign wives. They were "outsiders", they had to go. Imagine the social chaos as wives and children of these marriages were sent away, breaking families apart!

Judah, also seemed to forget that the Lord had called Abraham to a new land, to be the father of a great nation, in order to be a blessing to the world. Now, in an isolationist attitude of "only us", they couldn't be a blessing.

Bible scholars believe that at least two stories were written in this time from the years, 518 to 400 before Christ to counteract these practices and attitudes: Jonah and Ruth. Jonah is told by the Lord to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria and tell them to repent. Assyria was one of Israel and Judah's most hated enemies. Jonah will have nothing of that. He flees the opposite way, to the sea. You know how it turns out. He eventually is spit back on land, preaches to Nineveh, they repent and Jonah is unhappy they aren't punished. But the Lord tells Jonah that He cares for Nineveh also. Open your eyes and your arms to the rest of the world and care for them with my message, says the Lord!

Ruth tells us of a Moabite woman who loves and cares for her Jewish mother in law. How can that be? Ruth is a Moabite, we are to hate and disregard them? They are never to be loved or thought well of. Ruth is cared about and loved by a Jewish man named

Boaz. Unheard of! To make matters worse, Boaz marries Ruth, they have a son and he is grandfather to the best king Israel had! What do we have to rethink about “outsiders”?

What about God’s laws or policies that lay down firm rules? What about laws being kept or enforced no matter what? It seems that God wants them to be flavored or seasoned with love. A Moabite woman can be welcomed into Judah. She can be seen as a person who loves deeply and commits herself to the care of others. Love is not to be reserved for only those of your immediate family or tribe or nation or color.

Maybe rules and laws and policies are meant to keep our sinful and selfish “self” in check from doing unnecessary harm to others. They act as boundaries that we are not to trespass. They protect us from others and others from us, from our “sinful self” that would do harm. And on the other hand, maybe, as Paul says in Romans 13:8-10, that we are to season and flavor all we do with love for one another, for the one who loves has fulfilled the law. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.” Romans 13:10

Ruth is a story of love, by many people to others. Ruth is a story of God using love to make lives better. God seems to break God’s rules, but always in order that God’s love may work and act to bring about God’s will in God’s world. “Lord may we flavor all we do with love so that Your will may be done through us.” Amen