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*Deciding What is Important*

Ruth 1: 1-18

Mark 12: 28-34

Making plans is big business. And it is important. We are swamped with information about how to make decisions – what to buy, where to go, what to do. We plan. But even as we plan, things change. Life so often is like standing on the beach. You feel the water come in and the sand shifts. You have to rebalance yourself or you fall. We are making adjustments as we seek out a firm foundation.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is like that. Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, lived in Bethlehem. A famine came to that land and they went to find a better place for themselves and their sons. They went to Moab. Things got better. But then Elimelech died. Still the sons married young women from Moab. But then Naomi’s sons died. She was left as a widow and her children were dead, too.

Naomi decided to go back to Bethlehem. What else could go wrong? Her people would have to take her back. But her daughters-in-law began to come with her. She told them there was no point in that. One accepted Naomi’s advice. But Ruth did not. She persisted. Her words have been used to signify the power of commitment for thousands of years:

*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!”*

This is a profound and powerful affirmation of commitment and community. Life is about more than my interests or yours. Life is about what we do together. It is a statement about what is important. Love. Commitment. Service.

Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was. He responded by quoting from Deuteronomy 6:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*

And he also included a verse from Leviticus 19: [18]

*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself . . .*

Jesus was being tested and examined. He replied with all the right answers. And the crowd was astounded by what he said.

I think that Ruth was being examined as well. Naomi was saying that it was not worth her coming back to a place that she was not from to be with people who were not her own. Yet she did.

Mark Brewer is a Presbyterian minister in Atlanta. He relocated here from California about 4 years ago. He shared that it was only recently that he figured out that the saying *‘Bless your heart’* is not always a compliment. We might say something like, *‘You ain’t from around here, are you?’*

Naomi knew that Ruth would be greeted by that kind of skepticism. But maybe even more than skepticism. Maybe hostility. Folks who come from foreign lands are often treated as invaders or aliens or criminals.

But Ruth went. And Naomi affirmed her and guided her as they made their life together in Bethlehem. In the rest of Ruth, we learn that Naomi introduced Ruth to Boaz. They married. One of their children was Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse. And one of Jesse’s children was David. David became king.

In the gospel of Matthew there is a genealogy of Jesus. Three women are mentioned in that list of the ancestors of Jesus – and Ruth is one of them.

Ruth and Naomi *knew* who they were.

They clarified their calling to return to Bethlehem.

They mobilized their resources and worked hard to build their life there.

They *knew* what was important.

We have come to a point in time in the life of Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church to mobilize ourselves for our own time. Sometime in 2019, your Pastor Nominating Committee will report to you that they have a candidate to be your pastor. That person will be presented and elected. Your new pastor will arrive and together you will share in the ministry of Jesus Christ in and through this place.

What is important? To love God and to love neighbor. Those are the answers on the test. But the knowledge of the head and the actions of the heart sometimes are not in sync. That doesn’t mean we give up. It means we work our way through our time so that the testimony of faith is continued. The phrase that defines this community is printed on the front of the bulletin; *Connecting Faith with Everyday Life.*

It is our own way of describing what is important. It asks you to move beyond the right answers to the place of linking mind and heart in action.

Today we do that in several ways.

It is All Saints Day – the Sunday closest to November 1 when we remember those who have died this past year. We remember them, not to be morose, but to give thanks for the ways they shared with us. Naming them is to help move us from focusing on our own situation to give thanks for perseverance and ultimately being held securely in God’s loving hold. It is a way of saying we know what is important.

We also share in communion. This is a sacrament – a visible sign of an invisible grace. Simple elements from the grape and grain that feed us in a spiritual way. It is a way to say that what happens here is important.

And we have an opportunity to connect our faith by sharing a financial pledge for 2019. Of course, we share an offering each week, but a pledge is a personal way of signifying that we know it is important to plan together for our life as a congregation, an outpost for Jesus on Pleasant Hill Road.

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,*

*and with all your might.*

*Love your neighbor as yourself.*

These are the important things.

Thanks be to God.

Joel L. Alvis, Jr., Ph.D.

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