

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ruth 1:1-18; Psalm 146; Mark 12:28-34; Hebrews 9:11-14

Churches within the liturgical tradition celebrate All Saints Day either on November 1 or on the first Sunday in November. For churches who do not celebrate All Saints Day on that first Sunday, there is a lectionary for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time. This is our commentary on that lectionary.

Ruth 1:1-18. At the heart of the Hebrew community's life was the practice of an economics that both equitably shared wealth and redistributed wealth periodically in order to eliminate poverty within the nation. The primary vehicle that regulated the redistribution of wealth were the devices of the Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee (a sabbatical of sabbatical years).

Although the Year of Jubilee is remarkable legislation, indicating an intense commitment to wealth-sharing at the heart of Yahweh worship, the question has often been raised whether Jubilee was ever actually practiced. The importance of the book of Ruth is its demonstration that the elements of Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year were indeed observed.¹ And what is even more notable, that application of Jubilee and the Sabbatical Year was as applicable to the lowest Israelite peasant household as its very wealthiest citizen.

What was the Sabbatical Year and what was Jubilee? Every seven years, according to the Law of Moses, all debts of all Israelites were to be forgiven (Deut. 15:1-11). To accomplish this, of course, would require a massive redistribution of wealth. No liquid wealth was hereditary (although holding land – an Israelite's birthright – could be passed to future generations). Therefore, on every Sabbatical or seven years, when all debts were forgiven, wealth was inevitably redistributed. In essence those who through misfortune (like Naomi) or even poor management had sunk into poverty over that seven-year period would, through the forgiving of their debts, receive a transfer of wealth in order that they could begin all over again.

The Sabbatical Year also contained provisions regarding slavery (Deut. 15:12-18). The Israelite slave, who was more an indentured servant than chattel, agreed temporarily to service of a "master" as a way of paying off debts. The Law required that no "slave" could be held beyond six years except by his or her consent. On the Sabbatical Year, each slave throughout Israel was to be set free – and this applied as much to female slaves as to male.

The final regulation of the Sabbatical Year was that the land was to lie fallow so that it could renew itself (Exod. 23:10-11). With no fertilizers except animal dung to renew the earth, it had to "rest" in order to be able to continue to provide sufficient crops for the Israelites.

The Jubilee was the Sabbatical Year "writ large" – the seventh of sabbatical years, or a "Sabbatical of the Sabbatical Years". Therefore, like a conventional sabbatical year, the Jubilee

¹ There are other indicators throughout scripture, as well. Nehemiah, chapters 8-13 both present Jubilee and Sabbatical Year legislation and indicate how such legislation was enforced, and the communality of the Earliest Church was a continuing acting out of the Jubilee's regulations regarding wealth distribution. As well, archaeological evidence for the period of Judges indicates an equitable distribution of wealth in Israelite cities in Canaan, in comparison with Canaanite pagan cities which displayed a far greater disparity of wealth.

observed the forgiving of debts, the freeing of slaves and allowing the land to lie fallow (Lev. 25:8-12, 25-37, 38-41). But there is a fourth regulation, peculiar only to the Year of Jubilee. And it is the most important of them all.

Lev. 25:13, 23 and 28 presents this fourth regulation. It commands that at Jubilee time each family was to regain its ancestral land.

At the time of the creation of the Jubilee, the assumption was that each Israelite was a descendant of an Israelite who had entered the Promised Land at the time of the conquest under Joshua. As part of that conquest, each Israelite family and tribe had been assigned land. That was their “birthright”, and no one could take it from them. They could choose to “sell” it for up to forty-nine years for compensation, but at the end of the forty-nine years or until the next Jubilee (whichever came first), that land had to be returned free of charge to the Israelite family to whom Joshua had originally deeded it. It was their birthright.

Simply put, Jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune. It was Israel’s most radical vehicle to redistribute its wealth so that society could be rebalanced and neither wealth nor political power could accumulate in the hands of a self-selected few. Now, how does all this bear on the story of Ruth?

The story of Ruth occurs during the period of the Judges, before Israel crowned its first monarch (it was obviously written much later, but the story takes place during the period of the Judges). It should therefore be set between 1100 and 1050 BCE. Today’s Old Testament lesson introduces us to a woman of the city of Bethlehem named Naomi. The text precisely tells us that she was the wife of “Elimelech” who is defined as “an Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah” (Ruth 1:2). That means that Elimelech² and Naomi were both of the family of Ephrath, who was one of the original settlers and was assigned the birthright of land – a birthright passed down only to the male descendants of that family (not the wives or daughters).

But Elimelech faced a major problem. A profound famine had come upon the land so that Elimelech made the decision to seek refuge with his family in Moab. This meant that, in taking this action, Elimelech temporarily transferred his birthright over to an unnamed “next of kin”, who was to be the steward of that land on Elimelech’s behalf while he was gone.

The significance of Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons moving to Moab would not be lost on a Hebrew audience. Moab was the kingdom separated from Israel by the Dead Sea. It was considered the worst of all the nations surrounding Israel. It was the epitome of moral and ethical corruption, begun in incest (see Gen. 19), worshipped one of the most bestial gods of Canaan, and was always hostile toward Israel (Num. 22; Judges 3). What the Israelites thought of Moab was best caught up in the command, “No Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the

² One of the most intriguing elements in this book is the ironic use of names. “Bethlehem” means “house of bread”, and yet Naomi’s family is dying of starvation caused by a terrible famine. “Elimelech” means “My God is king”; yet he is surrendering his birthright to grovel for food in Moab. “Naomi” means “sweet” or “pleasant”, yet she faces unbelievable reversals in life and cannot help but be bitter. “Mahlon” and “Chilon”, their children, means respectively “diseased” and “perishing”, suggesting that birthed in poverty, they won’t have long to live.

assembly of the Lord. You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live” (Deut. 23:3, 6). Therefore, for Elimelech to choose to take his family into Moab was for him, in essence, to be entering into hell!

But into hell they enter, in order to stay alive. Naomi’s family settle in Moab, and her two sons marry Moabite women. Eventually, Naomi’s husband and two sons die (1:3-5). With the deaths of all three males, this means that her family’s “birthright” of land now automatically transfers to that “next of kin” who was caring for it, unless he chose to return it to her (what was called the “kinsman redeemer” (see the Old Testament lesson for the 32nd Sunday of Ordinary Time).

What, then, should Naomi do? She now has no land to secure her future, and no husband or sons to financially, politically, or physically to protect her. If she stayed in Moab, she would inevitably become a beggar, reject or prostitute, because Moab had no legislation to protect its women and orphans. If she returned to Israel alone, Naomi could not be guaranteed a return of Elimelech’s birthright (that would be up to the generosity of her kinsman redeemer), but she would at least receive some measure of protection from her kin and from Israel’s law code.

Naomi decides that the least objectionable alternative is to return to her home city in Israel where at least Israelite law will afford her greater protection than Moabite law. She therefore gives both of her daughters-in-law (both of whom are Moabitesses) permission to remain in their native land (1:6-14).

But the Moabite Ruth refuses to leave Naomi. In one of the most moving passages of devotion that appears in the Bible (Ruth 1:16-17), Ruth says to her mother-in-law, “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”.

Into whatever language these words of Ruth may be translated, they are both beyond beauty and the deepest of fidelity. But in the Hebrew, the key section of Ruth’s commitment to Naomi is even stronger. The Hebrew simply says “Your people my people; your God my God”. To capture its power, the best English translation would be “Your people become my people; your God is now my God”!

Ruth’s pledge is perhaps the most profound commitment of one person to another that appears anywhere in the Bible. It is *chesedh* in action – God’s love lived out in the love and fidelity of one person for another more vulnerable than she. This is an oath of loyalty and self-renunciation of unimaginable commitment to another that comes closest to being the kind of covenant that the Bible normally reserves between God and humanity. One is not only willing to give up one’s home, country or even kindred, in order to embrace the other’s people who only scorn your people and their God who has never previously been your God. The depth of Ruth’s commitment to her mother-in-law is stated best by Edward Campbell, Jr.

“In the Ruth (story) what is being portrayed are human beings doing what God’s will for human interrelationship call forth. They practice *chesedh*. We are not told what it is that inspires them

to do this, but in our story the life of integrity, of human responsibility and kindness – kindness above and beyond the call of duty – is portrayed, recommended, and shown to be attainable. What makes Ruth a true Israelite is that she behaves like one! In Ruth there is no miracle, no heady manifestation of God’s power, no fanfare. In that sense, there is no “conversion” at all, but simply a living out of the way of Yahweh, and of the way of Yahweh’s people when they are at their best”.³

Thus, Ruth pledges herself to the protection of Naomi and returns with her to Bethlehem. Now a stranger in a strange land, Ruth sets about to gain “redemption” for Naomi. How she does so is the primary subject of the book of Ruth. With the introduction of Ruth 1:1-18 (today’s Old Testament lesson), the author has set the stage for his exploration of “redemption” at work in the first millennium before the Common Era in Israel. That exploration will begin with next Sunday’s Old Testament lesson.

Psalm 146 speaks of God’s commitment to bringing about justice on the earth for those who are the powerless, the marginalized and the captive.

The opening lines of the psalm direct the reader (or hymn-singer) to God. “Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish” (vss. 1-4).

The psalm calls the believer to praise God and to place one’s trust in him – not in one’s political, economic or religious institutions. But that command to trust God then begs the inevitable question: “Why?” “Why should one place his trust in God and not in a nation’s or city’s leaders?” The answer of the psalmist is simply remarkable.

“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who keeps faith forever, who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the aliens. He upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (146:5-9).

This is a remarkable statement both because of its comprehensive sweep and its single focus. The essential question underlying this passage is, “For what ‘are those whose help is in the God of Jacob’ happy” (146.5). Why should we praise and worship God? The Psalmist answers that question this way:

“We should be happy because God keeps faithful with us, executes justice for the oppressed, feeds the hungry, sets prisoners free, heals the blind, lifts up the defeated, loves those who act justly, watches over strangers, and protects orphans and widows – the most vulnerable of society. That’s why we should worship God.”

³ Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible (NY: Doubleday, 1975), pp. 81-82.

God's commitment to justice is unquestionably stated here. The list is surprisingly long and surprisingly comprehensive. God is concerned with the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, the defeated, those who need justice, the alien, the orphan and widow!

It is crucial not to spiritualize this psalm! To spiritualize it is to miss both its very essence and its punch! No one can honestly read this psalm and then insist that God's chief desire is only for personal spiritual transformation. It just won't work! It is the politically powerless, the economically poor, the socially marginalized in society for whom God cares the most. These are the people with whom God deals. These are the ones whom God cares especially about. We should rejoice at such a priority on God's part. Therefore, service of the poor and the powerless should become our priority, as well – if we perceive ourselves as people after God's own heart!

Thus, the psalmist ends, "The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the Lord" (vs. 10)!

Mark 12:28-34 is Jesus' statement about the primary task of Israel, of the Church and, consequently, of all who make up both Israel and the disciple band. In this passage, he is asked by a scribe, "Which commandment is the first of all?" This was a matter of great debate among the various religious/political parties of Israel, for one would choose one of the Ten Commandments, while others would choose other commandments. Jesus' response is stunning.

"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" (vss. 29-31).

We do not know whether this scribe was asking an honest question or whether he was seeking to entrap Jesus, for this passage concludes a series of confrontations between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, in which they were seeking to invalidate him (11:27-12:27). Perhaps this ambiguity is part of the genius of Mark, because whether one is seeking to invalidate the work and message of Jesus or whether one is genuinely open and responsive to that work, Jesus' answer is definitive of the nature of true religion.

In his answer, Jesus doesn't choose one of the Ten Commandments as his "first commandment of all". Rather, he first quotes the Shema (or mission statement) of Israel (Deut. 6:4-5, with some minor textual changes designed to make its primary point more clear). And then he immediately moves to a statement about obligation to one's neighbor, as found in Leviticus 19:18, conflating that statement into his first quotation. He then concludes, "There is no other commandment greater than these".

In other words, what Jesus does here is positively startling. He takes two commands and makes them into one! It is not that one is to love God with one's entire being. Nor is it that one is to thoroughly love one's neighbor and to live that out in one's action. Rather, ***it is that authentic faith, in doing the one, automatically does the other!*** That is, you can't love God except through loving the neighbor. And you can't authentically commit yourself to your neighbor

except out of the context of loving God. The worship of God **is** the service of humanity. And the service of humanity is an act of worship of God!

As far as we know, Jesus was the only Jewish rabbi, up to that point, to both perceive and teach this truth. It is a mind-boggling insight in understanding the totality of a person's and a society's duty!

What is more, the very selection of the passage that Jesus quoted to declare that the spiritual task is to "love one's neighbor" is exceedingly specific. Leviticus 19 is about moral holiness – how holiness is to be lived out in everyday life. It begins with the command, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2). It then goes on to present how holiness is to be acted out. First, "when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field; those edges you shall leave for the poor and the alien" (vss. 9-10). Second, "you shall not steal, you shall not deal falsely, and you shall not lie to one another" (vs. 11). Third, "you shall not defraud your neighbor, you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning; you shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind" (vss. 13-14). Fourth, "you shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great; with justice you shall judge your neighbor" (vs. 15). Fifth, "you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people" (vs. 18a). Finally, after these specifics, the writer of the Leviticus code drew his conclusion from these specific examples: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (vs. 18b).

In other words, to "love your neighbor" was not meant by Jesus to be understood as treating your neighbor nicely. To love your neighbor meant that you were not to engage in any oppression or exploitation of your neighbor or of anyone living in Palestine. To love the neighbor is to create economic potential for the poor (vss. 9-10) by which he can, with dignity, act on his own behalf. To love the neighbor is to treat others fairly (vs. 11). To love the neighbor is to not exploit his labor, but to pay him fully and on time (vss. 13-14). To love the neighbor is to not pander to the rich but to act with unbiased justice (vs. 15). To love the neighbor is to not take vengeance on those who have wronged you (vs. 18a). To love your neighbor is to **actively** engage in eliminating oppression and exploitation, and working for the empowerment of those around you.

By choosing to quote Leviticus 19:18, Jesus clearly meant that living an activist life, intentionally seeking both the economic and political good of your neighbor is the most profound worship of God. We can make this assumption from this text because there were actually 15 Old Testament references available for Jesus to choose if all he wanted to say was, "Love your neighbor". Instead, he chose the one reference that was solely about working for neighborly freedom from political oppression and economic exploitation by both those in high places and by those all around you. And he likely chose this passage because it was this command of "love your neighbor", hiding under the blanket of "you shall love the Lord your God" that was the primary trespass of the priests, the Pharisees, Sadducees and the other people of power of Jesus' day.

The Gospel lesson then ends with the scribe commending Jesus for his summary of the Law, and Jesus responding to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (12:34). It is hard to know what Jesus meant by that response. Was he providing hope and encouragement to that scribe to

take the next step by repudiating the system that had separated the worship of God from a commitment to justice for the neighbor? Or was he suggesting that the “not far” meant that the scribe intellectually understood the relationship between the love of God and of the poor but was so bound into the systems that he would never break free of it. That Jesus did not follow up his “not far” statement with an invitation to that scribe to “come, follow me” is an indication that he realized that this scribe would not make the commitment to trade acting justly for his political and economic position.

The final words of this story are “After that no one dared to ask Jesus any question”. This is an indication that Mark meant for this story to be the concluding story of the pericope beginning in 11:27 as people of power sought to challenge Jesus’ authority and were profoundly challenged by Jesus instead.

Hebrews 9:11-14 describes the atoning work of Christ by using the metaphor of the Temple sacrifices. In the ancient Temple worship of Israel, a limited atonement would occur for the people each year when the high priest would enter into the “Holy Place” of the tent or tabernacle (later to be replaced by the Temples of Solomon and Herod). There, he would slaughter “goats and bulls” as a sacrifice for sins, and “with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer sanctify those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified” (Heb. 9:12-13, cf. Lev. 16:15-16 and Num. 19:9, 17-19). In this way, those who had paid for this sacrifice were cleansed of their sin for the past year. But next year, it would have to be the same thing done all over again.

In like manner, the author of Hebrews suggests, Jesus was the sacrificial lamb for God’s chosen people. The “Holy Place” where he was slain, however, was not the Temple but Gethsemane. His blood shed upon the cross was as the blood of goats and bulls sacrificed for sins, and his flesh, sacrificed for humanity, cleansed the people of their sin.

But the analogy goes only so far, the author of Hebrew suggests. For this was God’s Christ – the Messiah or Suffering Servant who was being slain – not some animal. Those animals might be without physical blemish, but Jesus was without spiritual blemish for he was without sin. The sacrifice performed by priests was only a limited external cleansing, but Jesus’ death was an atoning death, for his blood purified the “conscience” or inner person. Finally, Jesus’ death, through “the eternal Spirit”, brought about God’s saving will as the Spirit woos us irresistibly to Christ.

“For this reason,” the author of Hebrews concludes, “Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant” (vs. 15). Those who are chosen unconditionally by God to become God’s people, the author is saying, have been provided with a sure and certain atonement through Christ’s death and have been irresistibly wooed to Christ so that it is beyond them to reject such a pure and perfect salvation. It is such people who make up the “new Israel”, the “elect” for “those who are called will receive the promised eternal inheritance”. That is the power of this new and eternal sacrifice that God has made for the world!

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