

SERMON
By: Gail Fricker

“True Love”

November 4, 2018

Ruth 1:1-19

The story of Ruth and Naomi:

I am an old woman. Dying, with nothing to show for all my life. I have nothing to offer anyone - why does she love me so much?

Let me explain. I come from Bethlehem. My husband and I had to leave when a great famine struck our land back home. We stayed and tried to till the soil as long as we could, but it was no use. So, we left. We came here to Moab. We were so full of hope. Full of ideas. Full of promises of the new land. And to start with things were good. The soil was rich and our crops did well.

But soon after our first harvest, my husband died. Suddenly. I wept so much. My two sons were strong and brave, but it was difficult for me to bring them up all on my own. No family around me. No husband to provide for me. I felt like a foreigner in a strange land.

But we survived and the boys grew older. They became old enough to marry all too quickly. And of course, they chose Moabite women to be their wives - Orpah and Ruth. We all lived happily together - for ten good years. Things seemed good again. But in the springtime, before the barley harvest, my two sons died - and I was left all alone. How I grieved and mourned. My heart still aches.

Oh, I had my daughters-in-law yes, but they are not family, and besides, they should go back to their own families and find a new husband. They are young enough still - unlike me.

No, I was all alone. I felt a great hunger for my homeland. I wanted to go back. I'd heard that the famine was over.

So, one day, I told Orpah and Ruth to pack everything up, and the next morning as soon as the sun rose, we left the house where we had been living for ten years. We left with our few belongings and the memories of our dead husbands. We set out along the road until we came to the valley where Orpah's family live. I told her and Ruth they should leave and go back to their families. I remember I touched them each gently on the cheek; we embraced; we cried. It was very emotional. They didn't want to leave, they wanted to come with me. But I told them, I said:

"Why would you come with me? Am I going to have more sons who could become your husbands? Look at me; I'm too old and withered to have another husband. It is right that I should be all alone now. And if by some miracle I did give birth to sons, would you wait and grow older day by day until they became marriageable age. No! You must go home and find yourself a husband."

- And then we all started to cry again! But finally, Orpah did leave. She was crying and

shaking as she said good-bye and began to slowly walk down the valley. But not Ruth - no she clung to me.

"Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people, go with her" I told her. But instead, she took hold of my hand, she looked me in the eye and she said to me, ... she said

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"Don't make me leave you or turn back from you. Where you will go, I will go. And where you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I want to die, and there I will be buried with you. May God punish me if anything but death separates me from you."*

She was so determined. Such a strong commitment. Such love. And I am just a bitter old woman with nothing to offer her. I don't understand it, do you?

True Love. That is what Ruth had for Naomi. When I thought about that phrase as a title for today's message, I couldn't help remember the wonderful musical High Society, with Bing Crosby and Grace Kelly sailing on the water and singing:

"When I give to you, what you give to me, true love, true love ..."

Or maybe you remember better the Elvis Presley version *"True love, True Love ..."*

Or perhaps you are all a little more contemporary, and you think about Justin's Beibers latest song called 'True Love':

"Anytime that I need you, you stand by my side."

'True Love', has been the central theme for songs, poems, books, movies, plays, podcasts and goodness knows what else for centuries and centuries. 400 years ago, Shakespeare wrote 154 love sonnets. And today, if you google 'true love' on the Barnes & Noble book list, you will find, wait for it, 6673 books about what true love is, how to find it, and how to keep it when you find it! Incredible!

So, it is no wonder that LOVE was the central focus of the most important commandment that Jesus gives his disciples. When he was quizzed by the Pharisee, he answered exactly as expected:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:30)

The teacher of the law would have known the Torah well, and he would have been familiar with this commandment. It would not have been difficult for him to understand, or even to want to follow this commandment.

And I don't think that this first commandment is too difficult for any of us to want to follow. Sure, there are days when we might feel a little less like loving God.

And sure, there are days when we might find ourselves even blaming God a little when things don't go quite right, or when things seem a little gloomy.

But, when we live our lives in relationship with God, and when we take time to stop and remember how much God loves us through all the good times and difficult times - then it is easy to want to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and all our strength. Then we understand 'True Love.'

But, what about that second commandment? Jesus said:

The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself. (v.31)

Love your neighbor as yourself!

Have you ever stopped to wonder what that really means?

The phrase is so familiar, & so well known, that it is often called "The Golden Rule". And it is not just a rule, or commandment for Christians. It is a rule that appears in countless other faiths:

Buddhism says: "Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful"

Hinduism says: "Do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you"

Judaism says: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor."

Sikhism says: "I am a stranger to no-one, & no-one is a stranger to me; I am a friend to all"

The Baha'i faith: "Do not desire for anyone the things that you would not desire for yourself"

Muslim faith: "Not one of you truly believe until you wish for others what you wish for yourself"

'Love your neighbor as yourself. It is a universal, global, ancient commandment about how we are to live with each other in this world. It is not just about how we live with other Christians, or with others in the same culture and society as us. It is about reaching out across cultures, faiths, and boundaries.

Our story from Ruth teaches us that. Naomi came from Judea, but she found a home, and a welcome in the land of Moab. And it is in her relationship with her Moab daughter-in-law, Ruth, that she finds 'True Love'. The love is so amazing that she can not understand it. Ruth's words to Naomi are well known passage, and one that is often used in wedding ceremonies:

Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. (Ruth1:16)

They are wonderful words of 'true love', but the story is much deeper than just the words. The story continues as Ruth the Moabite settles with Naomi in Bethlehem, she gets married to the Israelite Boaz, she bears a child, who then later becomes the grandfather of King David.

So, if King David had been able to do an ancestral DNA test, he would have discovered that his great grandmother was actually a Moabite, a nation that was often scorned by the Israelites.

It is a story of true love that reaches across the boundaries of culture.

It is an example of Jesus' command to 'love our neighbours' – a command that includes everyone!

I wonder if there is anyone that **we** might find hard not to include in this message of love? Is there anyone that we consider ourselves 'better than'?

Our stories today in our world news are sadly full of hate crimes; we have all heard about the recent tragedy in Pittsburgh, where our Jewish brothers and sisters were targeted just because of their faith.

We might think that couldn't happen here, in Ayr, or Kitchener/Waterloo.

But, is there anyone that we try to stand apart from in an “us and them” attitude?
Are we really ready to treat others how we want to be treated regardless of their skin color, their faith, their sexuality, or their physical ability?

Here at Knox, we have an excellent opportunity to do this as we open up our sanctuary to those that are less able bodied. I know that it can be difficult to see things change. I know that some of you might be upset when we begin to reconfigure the seating here at Knox. But I encourage you to try to see these changes as an opportunity to reach out in love; to reach out with equality; and to reach out in a way that is in accordance to Jesus’ command.

‘Love your neighbor as yourself.

And when we do this - Jesus promises us that the reward is great. He tells us that when we accept others with love, then we are acting in way that ensures us that we “*are not far from the Kingdom of God*” (Mark 12:34).

In a world where there is so much hate, let us welcome opportunities to reach out with love, and bring the Kingdom of God to earth.

(quietly play Let There Be Love #19 Praise book)

So, let us take a moment to reflect what God’s Spirit is saying to us today. As Michael quietly plays for us, let us consider the ponder question from the beginning of the service today, it’s also printed in you bulletins:

“Who is it hard for you to include in God’s love”.

Take a moment to ask yourself that question.

Perhaps you know that you have set yourself apart from others with an “us and them” attitude.

Take some time to quietly pray that God will open you up, so that you can reach out, and so that you can love with all your heart, all your soul and all your strength.

(pause – then join in the singing)

Amen.