

## WHAT LOVE MEANS

***A sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, May 13, 2017  
based on Ruth 1:1-17, I John 4:10-11***

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a sermon series entitled, “The Points of the Cross—How the Cross of Christ Can Save You.” We have seen during this series how the cross is the central declaration of the love of God for us. As John said, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (I John 4:10) In the cross we see clearly what love is; and what we see is in sharp contrast to what often passes for love in today’s world.

In our contemporary society, love is quite often imagined as something you feel. So you may be feeling it, or you may not be feeling it; love comes, and goes. But love as portrayed in the Bible is something much deeper, much more powerful, and much more abiding. We can see it in a number of Old Testament stories, and we see it coming to ultimate expression on the cross. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The story that we heard this morning from the beginning of the book of Ruth is one of the greatest Old Testament stories about the real nature of love. The story begins with serious trouble. Naomi, an Israelite woman from Bethlehem, had moved to the neighboring land of Moab, along with her husband Elimelech and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion. The two sons had gotten married in Moab to Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. But in the span of about ten years, Elimelech died, and both Mahlon and Chilion died. This left Naomi in desperate straits, as in that culture it was very difficult for a woman to sustain a living on her own. Naomi resolved to go back to her home town of Bethlehem, where she had heard there was a bountiful harvest, and she might find help with relatives. She implored her daughters-in-law to stay in their home country of Moab, since she did not want to be a burden to them and felt they would likely have a better chance of finding new husbands and a good future in their homeland. Orpah tearfully took leave of Naomi. But Ruth did something extraordinary. She said to Naomi, “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, and there will I be buried.” (Ruth 1:16-17)

This account portrays several key features of what real love is. Love is commitment—Ruth makes a fundamental commitment to be with Naomi whatever may come. Love is “going with”—Ruth will journey alongside Naomi. Love means overcoming barriers—Ruth was a Moabite, who were not always well received in Israel, but she will journey across the border with Naomi. Love is self-giving; Ruth will support Naomi with her best efforts, in the midst of great challenge. Love is sacrifice; in order to help Naomi, Ruth sacrifices the much easier road that it appears she would have had in her own homeland. And love is grounded in faithfulness to God; Ruth rejects the crude polytheism that was prevalent in Moab and puts her faith in the Lord.

All these elements come to an ultimate expression in Jesus Christ. Jesus commits himself fully to humanity. He walks with us in our human condition, even to the point of death. He

overcomes the barrier between humanity and God, and reaches beyond the barriers between Jew and Samaritan and Gentile. He gives himself for us, and he makes the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. In all this, Jesus is grounded in faithfulness to his heavenly Father. Christ thus fulfills the key themes of the Old Testament and becomes the full picture of what genuine love means.

So when Jesus calls us to love God and love our neighbor, this is the sort of love he is talking about; and this is precisely the love that we seek to proclaim and celebrate and practice in the church.

We declare that real love is, first of all, commitment. Last Sunday, for example, when we celebrated Confirmation for eleven of our seventh graders, we did not ask them how they felt about God; we asked them to commit themselves to God, to promise to live as disciples. Likewise when we celebrate baptism for children, as this morning during the 10:30 hour, we ask the parents to make a spiritual commitment on behalf of their children.

From time to time I get a call from parents who have no connection with the church, and often no connection with any church, but who would like to have their children baptized. Somehow they would feel better if the children were baptized. I say to them, “We would be very happy to baptize your children, but just realize that baptism is a commitment. It is not some sort of spiritual inoculation, where you just get your child done and then go home and feel good about it. It is a commitment before God to raise your child in faith and in the church.” In most cases (not always but in most cases) I don’t hear from those parents again. Commitment can be hard to come by these days.

Christian love also means going with another; and this is especially useful to keep in mind whenever we are trying to help another person but are not sure what we can do. Sometimes feel we need to somehow have the answer for another person’s trouble. But in the story of Ruth, Ruth has no immediate answer for Naomi’s situation at all; what she does is go with Naomi—“Where you go I will go,” she says. When people are in trouble or grief or pain, one of the most helpful things we can do is simply to be there for people, to go with them in their journey.

Christian love also means crossing barriers. Throughout history, human beings have set up barriers against one group or another, and we continue to see it in many ways today. But God is continually breaking through such barriers, and one of the most extraordinary examples of this in the Bible is the story of Ruth. When Ruth accompanies Naomi, she crosses the border into the land of Israel, and they settle in the region of Bethlehem, where they make their living by gleaning leftover crops in the fields. You don’t expect anything to come of this poor widow Naomi and her foreign daughter-in-law Ruth. But through the amazing working of God’s Spirit, Ruth comes into connection with Boaz, a landowner in the area; they end up getting married, and she gives birth to a son named Obed—who will become the father of Jesse, who will be the father of King David. (Ruth bore a son . . . They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth 4:13,17) So God works in such a fashion that Ruth—an outsider—becomes the great-grandmother of the greatest king in the history of Israel, and thus a part of the lineage that will lead finally to the birth of Jesus. God breaks through the divisions and separations that human beings create. Jesus would continue this theme—speaking to a

Samaritan woman that everyone else rejected, healing the servant of a Roman centurion that all the Jews hated, and commanding his followers in the end to “go make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), thus overcoming the barriers between all peoples. So we are called today to break through every sort of division between people.

Love also means self-giving, and sacrifice, and these elements again are well illustrated in the story of Ruth. Gleaning in the fields—which is what Ruth did to support herself and Naomi—was hard work; it involved picking up the bits of crops that were left over on the ground or on the edges of fields after a harvest. The story of Ruth thus demonstrates the principle that love is not merely something you feel but something you do; and of course we see that principle coming to its ultimate expression in Jesus, as he gives his life for us and makes the absolute sacrifice for humanity on the cross. So in the church today, when we talk about living out the love of God, we talk not about how God wants us to feel about others, but what God wants us to do. We act to help others—putting in hours, for example, to do a Trash and Treasure sale that raised thousands of dollars for mission work, and that also provided many low-cost items for people in our area.

Finally, in the story of Ruth, everything that she does is grounded in her faithfulness to God. “Your God will be my God,” she professes, as she accompanies Naomi. It is our experience of God’s love that inspires and empowers us to authentically live in love toward others. Especially as we look to the cross, we see the full nature of God’s love for us—how God is committed to us, how God through Christ is truly with us in life, how Christ overcomes our human barriers of sin and weakness, how Christ gives himself for us, in a sacrifice that finally puts us right with God. And so, as John said, “If God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” (I John 4:11)

The love that is exhibited in the Bible, coming to its culmination in Jesus Christ, thus provides the shape for Christian living today. We can live out such love in many ways; and certainly it is worth noting on this Mother’s Day that all these elements can come to a particular expression in parenting. When parents love their children, that love goes way beyond feeling. There are times when parents may not feel too hot about what their kids are doing. But the Spirit of God is at work to move parents to live out all the principles we have noted this morning. So in closing we share with you now a video about a mother; it is a little vignette with a number of scenes which illustrates how love means commitment, it means being there no matter what, it means continually overcoming barriers, it means self-giving, and it means sacrifice; and it all ultimately bears fruit as we are grounded in the goodness and faithfulness of God.

(A “skit guys” video entitled “Motherhood” was shown)