

A Welcoming Faith
(Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34)

10/27/24
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We are approaching a moment in our nation's history, where our future direction as a people will be set on a path that will effect all humankind and our planet for generations to come. I wish I were exaggerating. But I'm pretty sure that I am not.

And so I must speak to this moment from the heart of the Christian faith, as Jesus does in this morning's Gospel, when in answer to the question, "What is the most important commandment, he says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

This should be clear enough for all to understand. But just to clarify who Jesus is talking about when he calls us to love our neighbors, he tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the story of the Syrophenician woman, and the story of the woman at the well. And these examples clarify for us that he is specifically including foreigners and he is including our perceived enemies.

And just to make this crystal clear, he says in the sermon on the Mount, "You have heard it said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your

enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

What Jesus and the main core of our scriptures make clear is that, we do not treat other people as lesser or deny them our goodwill or friendship because they come from another culture or speak a different language or belong to another team. We treat them with the same dignity we hope would be extended to us.

Christianity is not a tribal religion. It is a universal religion. And this means that our concerns are not to be limited to the boundaries of the tribe. It means that our concern is for the well-being of all. As many different peoples, we do not live in separate universes, we live in one universe, with one true God who reigns above every culture and religion.

Jesus is very clear eyed about what we are up against. We are all sinners who, in one way or another, are deceived by our fears and misunderstandings. He wants us to understand that the first enemy we must overcome is the evil that comes forth from our own mouths in response to our fears and he wants us to understand how great a sin we are committing when we project all that is wrong with the world onto other people, rather than examining ourselves.

At the same time Jesus sees the God created goodness that is latent in all of us, and he treats each person as infinitely precious and ultimately redeemable. We are all so precious to him, that he suffered and died for us, so that we might live.

All of this bears repeating. Christianity does not justify giving greater worth to insiders at the expense of caring for outsiders. Ours is an inclusive religion, in which Jesus's concern is always for restoring those who are somehow being left out or left behind, and his concern does not have boundaries.

And so, it doesn't matter what color you are, what country you come from, what language you speak, what your gender identification is, or what political affiliations you have - the Golden rule applies.

Christianity is not a tribal religion. It is an all-inclusive global religion, that recognizes sin in all people and seeks salvation for all people. And we are to draw our strength, not from shutting others out or destroying adversaries, but by turning strangers and enemies into friends and co-workers.

And the tools we have been given to achieve this task are the spiritual disciplines Jesus calls us to practice: confession, forgiveness, remembrance, servanthood, hospitality, non-violence, honesty and respectfulness. And the phrase “You shall love God and your neighbor as yourself.” says it all.

An Immigrant Story

The command to “love our neighbors as we love ourselves” has a beautiful example in this morning’s reading (which must be why it was chosen to accompany today’s Gospel).

The book of Ruth describes how an immigrant woman is fruitfully integrated into Israelite society. Her mother-in-law Naomi, is an Israelite living in the land of Moab and Ruth is a Moabite who marries one of her sons. Unfortunately, Naomi’s husband and both her sons die and Naomi decides to return to her homeland. But Ruth loves her mother-in-law so much that she is unwilling to leave her side. So she goes along with her mother-in-law and enters as a foreigner into Israelite society.

The book goes on to describe how Ruth walks beside the fields of her mother’s relative Boaz, picking up grain that falls to the side during the harvest to take home for her mother and herself to eat. It describes

how Boaz comes to favor Ruth and then marry her. It is a very touching story about love and loyalty that extends across national boundaries. And it is a story that describes how Ruth is successfully assimilated into Israelite society.

And we should consider that it is a story very much like that of many immigrants who are rarely mentioned in today's fevered arguments. In spite of all the heated rhetoric over the criminals who enter, the vast majority are travelling to a strange new land for reasons of love, loyalty and desperate need, with motivations not so different from that of Ruth. And like her, most want nothing more than to make ends meet, contribute their fair share and be left in peace.

Jesus: The Descendant of Immigrants

And most significantly, for us as Christians, the immigrant Ruth is one of the ancestors of Jesus. Her name is listed in his family tree along with smattering of other foreigners.

The biblical genealogies make no attempt to hide the fact that Jesus himself is not of pure Israelite stock (as if such a thing is even possible). On the contrary, they make clear to us that the central figure of our faith, the man who we confess as perfect in his humanity and divinity,

has a fair amount of immigrant ancestry. This is an affront to those who have tribal sensibilities and believe in treating outsiders differently from insiders. But it is essential to the message of Christianity. Because what is important for Christianity is not where we come from. What is important is our desire to love as God loves.

A Favorable View of Immigrants

I know that there is a lot wrong with our immigration system that needs to be fixed. And I know that there are criminal elements who have entered the country because of flaws in the system and need to be dealt with. But for this morning, I need to draw attention to this more favorable viewpoint, because it is becoming lost in the name calling and dehumanizing of immigrants and because the favorable portrayal of immigrants and God's command to "love our neighbors" in our scriptures cannot be overlooked by Christians.

For many generations people from different lands have immigrated to this country. They have been, for the most part poor people with good intentions, struggling to care for their loved ones and for a better life. They have contributed to the economy and also benefited from it.

My Personal Account

This is how I see my own family history. We were not infiltrators who came to this country to take away jobs from good Americans or to burden social programs. Just as Ruth's story is one motivated by love and the desire to contribute, I see my own family history as both a contribution to the life of this country and I am grateful for the freedom and benefits I have received in return.

My father came to this country from Japan in the 1950's and married my mother here. He didn't take away a job that could have been taken by an American. He filled a position for which he was uniquely qualified. And my brother and I, who are his sons, are also not replacing anyone. The reality is that there is a shortage of Christian ministers and that he and I are filling positions that probably would have remained vacant were we not available.

So, when someone looks at a minority person like me and sees my Japanese name on our church sign and sees it as evidence of a new immigrant taking an American job, I have two answers. First, I am not taking someone else's job. I am filling a shortage. And secondly, I have been an American citizen all my life. And my roots in this country go back to the 1880's.

My ancestors on my mother's side came to this country at almost exactly the same time the former President's ancestors first arrived. And I served honorably in the US military as an infantryman, which neither he nor anyone in his family history have ever done.

So when this candidate racializes the immigration debate with words like "they are poisoning our blood", calls immigrants "garbage", and calls my country a garbage can, I take it personally. And I recognize these words as an expression of the kind of tribalism that stands in direct contradiction to God's command that we are to "love our neighbors as ourselves."

In fact, I am bracing myself for the possibility of four years in which the American public will be encouraged to look on well-meaning minority citizens like myself with distrust, identifying us as vermin and leeches on a true America that one of our candidates has chosen to define with the language of racial purity and an appeal to our tribal instincts

That language undermines the very foundations of our Christian faith and I believe that I am obligated as a Christian minister to point it out.

The Future

It is very possible that the tribalistic tendencies that are being fanned right now may burst into flames a few weeks from now, regardless of which way the election goes. And if things go badly, it will be important for us as Christians to hold with all our heart and strength and mind as closely as we can to the teaching that Jesus lifted up above all others: “You shall love the Lord your God and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” And that means all of our neighbors.

And let me not end on a negative note, but a positive one. No matter what happens, no-one can take the Kingdom of God away from any one of us. It belongs to all of us. We always have the power to open our hearts to God and to love our neighbors more. It is always our choice. And because that choice is always there, the entrance into God’s blessed kingdom is always there waiting for us to step into it. Let’s step into it often.