

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

October 13, 2013

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church – Pastor Chip Wilke

Ruth 1:1-19

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there. Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband. When she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, Naomi and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah. Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me--even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons--would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the Lord's hand has gone out against me!" At this they wept again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her. So the two women went on until they came to Bethlehem.

Faithfulness. Commitment. Do you see a lot of it? Or would you agree that we could use many more good examples today? All around us there is a lack of faithfulness and commitment. One example of this is in marriages. Look at the divorce rate today where half of all marriages fail and we see all too often there is a great lack of commitment. Every thirteen seconds another divorce is taking place in America. But it isn't just in marriages. The statistics are showing Americans are quitting their jobs at an alarming rate. More than ever before, instead of sticking it out, people are telling their bosses "I'm out of here." Two million Americans are quitting their jobs every month. Here is are some stats even more tragic – every two seconds in our world another child becomes an orphan due to parents who simply neglect or abandon their child. Every thirty-eight seconds in the United States another teenager attempts to end they life they have been given. I don't like to think about the lack of commitment to the unborn. There is even a lack of commitment to protecting and taking care of life! Reflecting on the world in which we live we turn to God's Word this morning looking for an answer to this question: **What does loving commitment even look like anymore?**

In our search for what loving commitment looks like we go back over 3000 years to the story of Ruth in the days when the judges ruled. We find this example of true faithfulness and loving commitment in a backdrop of tragedy and sadness. There is a man from Bethlehem in Judah who decides to move his family. He makes this difficult decision because they had no food. So Elimelech, along with his wife Naomi and two sons leave their home, their family & fellow believers, and the land God had given them, to go to the foreign land of Moab. You might remember the Moabites were cousins to the Israelites, descended from Lot. But for ten generations now because of their worship to foreign gods, mere idols, the Moabites were separated from the Israelites. There was bad blood between them. Nevertheless, Elimelech decides that **“for a while”** his family will leave Bethlehem and live in Moab.

But there would be no return for Elimelech for we read: **“now Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died.”** And the little while they decided to stay turned into ten years. Their two sons even married Moabite women. But then **“after they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon & Kilion also died.”** Remember I said this story is one filled with sadness. Imagine being in Naomi’s shoes. It had to be tough enough living in this foreign land, but then to bury her husband and now two sons – almost unthinkable! To make matters worse, there was no social security or life insurance in those days. Her two sons were her only means of support after the death of her husband. Retirement plans A & B are gone and there is no plan C!

Finally, Naomi gets a bit of good news when **“she heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.”** So Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law she is going back home to her people and to her land. And Orpah and Ruth follow her, which was customary when saying good bye, until somewhere down the road toward Judah Naomi tells these two girls to go back. She thanks them for their faithfulness to her sons and to her. Here we see the faith that lived in this family. Naomi uses the name for God, the LORD, or Yahweh, which is the God of free and faithful love, the covenant God, the God who keeps His promises. She asks the Lord to bless them and bring them new husbands to care for them. They weep and hug and her daughters even offer to go with her. But Naomi points out a harsh reality. It will be nearly impossible for them to find husbands and make a living in Bethlehem. She is too old and even if she did remarry would they really wait for her sons. She tells them life will be much easier for them if they stay in Moab. And Orpah does. But the sad part is more than Orpah leaving her mother-in-law to go it alone. Naomi talks about Orpah going **“back to her people and her gods.”** By leaving she was cutting ties with the one true God and going back to mere idols.

Perhaps we could pause here for a moment and think about our loving commitments, or should I say a lack thereof! While God certainly cares about our faithfulness and commitment in our homes and at work, I want us to think about our most important commitment. How committed are we to the Lord? How committed are we to His Word? For some of us it has been longer than others, but do you remember the promises you made when you became members of God’s church here? We promised to be faithful in worship, faithful in use of His Word and Sacrament, faithful in prayer, faithful in using our time and treasures to carry out His mission of spreading the Gospel. How faithful have we been? Where does church stuff rank in our list of priorities? What has our loving commitment looked like at times? When things get tough do we waver on this commitment? How often have we turned away to other gods – gods called money, pleasure, sports, or anything else we put first instead of the Lord? What does loving commitment even look like anymore!

We turn now to Ruth. Unlike her sister Orpah who went back, Ruth ***“clung to her.”*** The Hebrew verb here communicates the strongest and tenderest of emotions. She literally stuck close to, attached herself to - ***“Ruth clung to Naomi.”*** Ruth would not go back. She would not leave Naomi and she would certainly not go back to foreign gods. Instead, Ruth replies: ***“Don’t urge me to leave you or turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”*** Is this not, dear friends, what loving commitment look like? What a beautiful promise!

Yet, if we see this only as a story of Ruth and her faithfulness to her mother-in-law Naomi, we miss out on the true example for us. For the greatest example of a loving commitment here comes once again from our God. The Lord did not abandon these women. He provided for them. He gave them each other. He used Naomi and her family to bring Ruth to faith in Him. He would use Ruth to take care of Naomi. And you have to read the rest of the story to see just how faithful the Lord was to Naomi and Ruth. He would even provide for Ruth a kinsman redeemer, a kind believer named Boaz to marry her and preserve their lives. And through this line He would provide these woman and all people the Redeemer. You see God would bless Ruth with a son, more than that - a son who becomes the grandfather of King David from whose line will come the Savior.

What does loving commitment even look like anymore? Jump ahead a little over a thousand years later and see it in a feedbox outside of Bethlehem. Understand that wrapped there in swaddling clothes is your God! Watch what loving commitment looks like in Jesus’ perfect life of love lived in our place on our behalf. What does loving commitment look like? Peer upon the cross where Jesus suffered for all of our unfaithfulness and lack of commitment, and watch Him stay there until He would die to pay the price of all our sin. See what loving commitment looks like as it is buried in a tomb, a tomb that would be left behind on the third day in victory. See what loving commitment looks like in a Lord that knew you before you were formed in the womb, redeemed you, made you His own, and will one day take you to heaven. Open His Word and see a faithful God and Savior. This is what loving commitment looks like!

Please permit me just a minute to talk on a personal note. As I studied these words of God again this week I had to thank God for Lisa, my wife. I know that I’m embarrassing her right now and I am going to get in trouble for this later, but I want her to know publicly what a blessing she has been to me. I thank God for the loving commitment Lisa has made to me and for her faithfulness. These words here in Ruth are the words we picked out on the day we were married, now over 16 years ago. They are words we felt were very fitting for a girl who was marrying a guy studying to become a pastor. ***“Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”***

If the Lord has blessed you with a faithful spouse, friend, or parents join me today in thanking God for them. What a blessing to have someone so faithful, to be able to enjoy such a committed love! But far greater, give thanks today for the Lord is faithful. He loves you with an everlasting love. Jesus committed His whole life to saving you so that you will be with Him forever. He won’t let anything snatch you out of His hand! So that’s what loving commitment look like! Amen.

