

BUILDING A BRIDGE

November 4, 2018

Pentecost 29

[Ruth 1:1-18](#)

[Mark 12:28-34](#)

(prayer)

If you have been coming to this church for a bit, you may have noticed that (every once and a while) I switch up the short bits of service music that start and end the services: candle lighting, offering song, going out (and on most weeks a piece of music to sing as people go to Sunday school). Typically, I tend to use the same *service music* for a month or so... or for a identifiable church season.

Since this is the first Sunday of a new calendar month, I chose different service music than what was used in October.

//

On the standard western calendar (Gregorian), this is the penultimate month of the year - second last.

On the liturgical calendar of the Church year, this is the final month. The new year on the church calendar always starts four Sundays before Christmas day (season of advent). With December 25th being a Tuesday this year, Advent will begin on December 2nd... which makes November 25th, the last Sunday of the current church year. So, the eleventh month of 2018 is also the final month of the liturgical year (year B of the [revised common lectionary](#))

On the Church calendar, the last Sunday of each "year" provides a focus on the "leadership of Jesus": the day is sometimes called *Reign of Christ* Sunday or *Christ the King* Sunday. That will be part of the focus three weeks from today.

//

I have chosen this month's recurring service music to reflect this reign of Christ theme:

- Start: *Seek ye first the kingdom of God.*
- SS (starting next week): *We know God's reign will surely come.*
- Offering: *Make full the circle of God.*
- Prayer Candles (next week): *Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.*
- End: *Jesus shall reign.*

//

I use this "kingdom-reign" language understanding that, in our modern, democratic context, this language is a bit archaic.

And kingdom language is patriarchal, even sexist.

I mean, do we ever hear about a *queendom*? Even though the female monarch, Elizabeth II, has led the House of Windsor for 66+ years, she is still said to preside over a "king"dom.

//

//

Because of the inherent sexism and hierarchal patriarchy, I am not a frequent user of kingdom language or metaphors.

//

A keen eye might notice that, occasionally, I employ a similar sounding phrase: the KINdom of God - in God we are related; we are of a common family; we are kin.

But KINdom is not a replacement for KINGdom.

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

Kingdom language is a holdover from a day (mostly) gone by. Kingdom language in the church has origins in our biblical tradition. The reality of biblical times is that civil and military authority is almost exclusively limited to dictatorial monarchies. The one exception was during the first years after the Exodus.

After Joshua led the Israelites into the land of Canaan (where the people settled), there was no centralized leadership, no national monarchy.

The “sovereign in charge” of the Hebrew people was the evolving Law (The Torah). Each community had people *wise in the law* who could arbitrate disputes and make clear what the Torah dictated for life in and amongst the tribes of Israel.

It was the time of the Judges.

Perhaps centuries of living as slaves in a dictatorial monarchy motivated the Israelites to try things differently. Yahweh-God would be their pharaoh/king. And God would rule through the Torah.

//

It didn't last.

About 400 years later, the Israelites demanded a different system. God relented and Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel.

//

Over this month, I plan to explore some of the modern value to using Kingdom language: especially with how it can help us understand the impact of Jesus' ministry within his early first century context.

But today, we will begin this *final* month of the church year within the era of the judges: the time of the Hebrew tribal confederacy.

//

//

In the days when the Judges ruled, a famine in Judah forced Elimelech, Naomi (and their two sons) to leave Bethlehem and move southeast (beyond the Dead Sea) into the land of [Moab](#).

//

We heard these opening words from chapter one of the book of Ruth.

Ruth was a moabite. She enters the history of Israel because she married Naomi and Elimelech's son, Mahlon.

Okay, the bible is ambiguous about which son actually married who, but *tradition* pairs Orpah with Chilion and Ruth with Mahlon.

In a time of history when the well-being of women was most often tied to the men in their lives (fathers, husbands, adult sons, brothers, uncles, etc.), after Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion died, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah had little choice but to seek out to the safety and security of their extended families.

These three women shared no blood-family connection; they were *only* in-laws - related by the familial relationships of their respective husbands. Once the men that connected them were gone, there was nothing in their societal or cultural conventions that bound them.

//

But (as we heard), something much stronger than any cultural convention or societal norm remained. Even without the men in their lives, they saw each other as beloved kin. They cared about each other. They treasured each other's company.

If you are looking for a biblical example of the KINGdom of God, this story might be *it*.

//

Having to separate from each other was hard...

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

... and was only palatable because Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah assumed that their lives depended on it. Their compassion for each other was not enough to provide them with a roof over their heads or food on their plates.

//

Naomi would go back to the home of her father and brothers; the famine had ended by that time. At her age, Naomi would be dependent on the younger generation and the generosity of those in Judah who took seriously the Torah expectation to be generous to the needs of widows, orphans and foreigners in the land.

//

The Moabite social safety net traditions may have been different (I don't know), but (assuming the story's author does know) - no doubt - the wisest thing for Orpah and Ruth to do would be to return to their families of origin too. Presumably, the younger widows were likely still young enough that a second marriage was not out of realm of the possibility - there is no mention of children for either of Naomi's daughters-in-law.

Naomi loved her son's wives so much that she was willing to sever the relationships so that they might have the chance at a better future. She used a self-deprecating, cruel logic with them - *My only value for you is to provide you sons with to marry. Well, I have no more to offer. And even if I bore more asap, would you wait for them to grow up?*

Orpah reluctantly agreed to Naomi's wishes.

She went *home* with tears in her eyes and a broken heart in her chest.

//

Ruth was harder to convince.

//

Where you go, I will go; where you live, I will live; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

//

//

The love between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law would bridge the divides of religion, culture, and social convention.

If you are unfamiliar with the rest of the Ruth story, I encourage you to read it. The book is only four chapters long... and (after today) you are already three-quarters of the way through chapter one.

I will spoil the ending, which actually is a bit subtle at the end of the last chapter.

Ruth ... bore a son ... named ... Obed [who] became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

//

Ruth, the moabite widow is literally part of the bridge within the history of Israel that connects the era of the Judges to the era of the Kings.

A direct result of Ruth choosing her relationship with Naomi over her own social safety net was the embodiment of the greatness of Hebrew leadership. In a way, it is fair to say that Ruth is (at least partially) responsible for the messianic tradition that gave rise to how Jesus was understood during and after his lifetime.

//

Ruth of Moab was King David's grandmother.

//

It is a only coincidence of names, but Wynonna and Naomi Judd said it as well as anyone: [Love can build a bridge.](#)

//

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

//

In our reading from Mark, Jesus takes on the role of a wise judge of old. *What is the most important commandment in all of the Torah?*, he is asked.

Jesus quotes two: Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord alone is our God. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might; and secondly, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Every Jew knew the first commandment that Jesus chose. It is called the sh'ma: the Hebrew word that begins the passage: *sh'ma yisrael* (hear, israel). Even today, observant Jews consider the Sh'ma to be the most important part of the prayer service in Judaism, and its twice-daily recitation as a *mitzvah* (religious commandment). It is traditional for Jews to say And Shema as their last words, and for parents to teach their children to say it before they go to sleep at night.

//

Mark doesn't say it explicitly, but the scribe may have been trying to embarrass Jesus into giving an arguable answer. But... it's hard to argue with the sh'ma.

You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that [these are] much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.

Jesus' summary lesson in this passage is to profess that appreciate the centrality of love within the torah is to be on the path that brings us nearer to God. AND... by connecting our love for God to the compassion that is possible within our human relationships we are getting a glimpse of what the Realm of God looks and feels like.

You are not far from the kingdom of God!

//

//

As a Christian minister, I am occasionally asked to try and define what it means to be a "christian". Sometimes, the question arises out of an experience a person has had - or even a news story that a person has seen - where the attitudes or actions of someone calling themselves christian seem (at first glance) an odd fit for a religion of love. *You know what I mean.*

//

I am not so naïve to not understand the incredible diversity that exists within Christianity.

We may have begun with a few fisherfolk hanging out with a carpenter, but (over two millenia) we have evolved into millions of adherents who have self-divided themselves among thousands of sects and denominations: many of whom are so convinced that they have a monopoly on the truth that they barely acknowledge that the others exist, little lone ascribe to them any legitimacy within their definition of what it means to be "christian".

As a old friend of mine once quipped: *how do you tell the righteous from the unrighteous? Ask the righteous. They seem to be doing all of the dividing.*

Although some pastors might respond to the question: *who is a christian?* with a list of doctrinal confessions to adhere to, I tend to stick to a more two-fold basic definition. For me:

A Christian is someone

(1) who finds a meaningful connection to God through experiences with the story of Jesus and

(2) who tries to live in a manner that follows Jesus' way.

//

I am open to a variety of ways to experience Jesus: for some this is intellectual; for others, it's emotional even mystical; still for others it is through tangible actions or service. For many, the experiences vary. I draw on the bible for this perspective; it was the apostle Paul who taught about

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

how one spirit was expressed in a variety of gifts, a variety of services and a variety of activities.

//

I am a little more fundamental when it comes to what it means to “follow Jesus’ Way”.
For me: it is...

W.W.J.D

what would Jesus do?

or more specifically,

what did Jesus say to do?

//

//

Sh’ma-Plus

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might; and
secondly, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.*

Matthew 25 (Reign of Christ - Year A - RCL)

*Come, inherit the kingdom for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me
something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I
was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.*

//

//

The bridge that connects us to our Maker is constructed of loving attitudes and compassionate
actions.

//

And it is engineered strong enough for everyone to cross.

//

Let us pray:

Open my heart, O God, to feel your love. A d wider still to share that love. Amen.

offering

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg