

NOVEMBER 20, 2022

# Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



SERMON November 13 'Fruits- Ruth' Ruth 1:6-19, Ruth 3:1-3

This week we continue our follow up to the series on evangelism. We are looking at real cases in scripture of people who were reached out to in a way that grew their relationship with God, changed the course of their life, and the "hows" and "whos" involved in that journey.

Last week we looked at David. Samuel was the one who called, invited, directed him to his anointing as King. He put David on the path. Saul, Jonathan, Joab, and Nathan all walked with David in different ways, but all significant to help David not only become a king, not just a good king, but a good and Godly king.

This week we look at someone very different, Ruth.

As I read through her story, I noted something that seemed to be missing at first, but then it became clear that nothing was missing. I'd simply missed seeing it. We'll get to it soon, but as a tease it's akin to the story of the old and young monks. One Sunday they left the monastery and walked all day all over town. They chatted with people, merchants, children and the like. By day's end the young monk vented his frustration. "It's Sunday and we haven't preached at all!" The old monk replied, "you haven't been paying attention, we've been preaching all day."

The story begins with Naomi and her husband, two Israelites who flee Judah because of a famine. They settle in Moab, ultimately they and their two sons. The sons, likely out of necessity and practicality married Moabite women. Now this was a very real misdeed for the people of Israel. From the time of Moses, this was a "no go". It was expected that they would not intermarry with the nations and tribes around them. It wasn't because the ethnicity or race or so forth of their neighbors was an issue. It was their faith.

God knew that to intermarry would mean pleasing their spouses, who worshipped idols, false gods. This would lead them away from God into idolatry, and this happened time and time again throughout Israel's history. In the time of Moses, there was a time when the Hebrews were violating this expectation in grand form. They were struck with a plague that killed thousands. One day a Hebrew man paraded a foreign woman across in front of many people back to his tent. A man named Phineas was so enraged he grabbed a spear and killed the man and the woman. Because finally someone showed such passion for the sin being embraced and stood up to it, God relented on the plague. The sense that God wants God's people to stay true and faithful is very real, with this being an extreme illustration of that.

These Israelites, though likely out of practicality were nevertheless tempting the fates.

As time passed, the three men died. Naomi's husband and their sons. We don't know why, we just know that they did. At this time the famine had backed off and Naomi decides to set out for home. Before she does she tries to send off her daughters in law, Ruth and Orpah. We get a little insight into Naomi here and her faith. She releases these women citing the levirate marriage notion. Meaning she must have instructed them about some of their Israelite customs otherwise they wouldn't have had a reference point for her reasoning. The levirate marriage was the custom by which if a man married a woman and died before fathering a child, the woman was passed as a wife to the next male in the family in line. The expectation was that if she bore a child, that first one would be attributed to the dead husband to carry on his name. Here Naomi is clearly referencing this as she tells them to go back to their own land and their own gods. She says that even if she were to find another husband, and eventually in her age bear sons, by the time those sons were old enough to wed would Ruth and Orpah really want to? Would they even themselves be able to bear children? To Naomi the answer is "of course not".

At first both women refuse to leave. After some further urging, Orpah goes back to her home. Ruth does not. In fact Ruth

commits herself to Naomi. “Where you go I go, where you die I die, your God is my God.” She will NOT abandon Naomi. She has been called to a discipleship of sorts. She has been called into a devoted relationship with Naomi, and by extension Naomi’s God.

Who called Ruth and how? If our sense of invitation and calling is limited to a conversation or a persuasive story or challenge that converts another then it can’t be Naomi. She in fact has done the opposite. She has tried to drive Ruth away from her and in effect back into the arms of her own false gods. Ruth stays and follows anyway. Why?

Naomi is still the one who called Ruth. Invited her. Inspired her. She witnessed without saying a word. Whatever Naomi was, her example was such that Ruth felt compelled that this woman had something she needed or wanted. This woman could show her more and better. This woman had a character worth following, and so if this woman put her faith in a God that would be the God for Ruth.

We talked about how relationship is the strongest and most compelling way to give testimony to our faith and the object of it. This is an absolute case in point. Even when Naomi is trying to shake Ruth, the content and strength of their relationship was such that the witness was unmistakable. Ruth wouldn’t think of going anywhere else. Sometimes simply living out our life in humble, powerful, palpable faith is more inspiring than debating on a corner with someone about whether or not God exists. Our example demonstrates God’s existence because the love and peace generated through our relationship with God is beyond the natural. It is supernatural.

After Ruth is invited, then the coming alongside takes place. This looks very different than we saw with David. David was with people of like mind, like background, like tradition, like nationality. Very different, Naomi and Ruth are from two totally different cultures and backgrounds. Their customs are different as is their worship. Ruth had committed to a new life that she knew very little about. Naomi’s coming alongside was necessary, critical, and instructive.

Once again, this isn’t unlike when a new believer comes to faith. They enter a new church with new people they don’t know. There are new customs, expectations, written and unwritten rules. There are new stories, new habits, new personalities to navigate. Every congregation has its own unique sensibilities and their own personality. There is shared history that is part of the DNA of the church that you only get to know after a time immersed with the people, and there is a texture to the people who lived through it rather than heard about it.

It takes time. I remember when I first came to Marion. I heard stories about Rally Day. Stories about how the sanctuary was moved brick by brick from where it was to where it is. Multiple generations talking about their own stories of coming up through youth fellowship and Sunday School. The building itself carries the mark of stories and time. Each addition to the sanctuary is marked with a stone that has the year it was constructed. Those stones represent stories, time, faithfulness, and ministry. Some of you have been here for most if not all of those times. You pass along that history and wisdom to those of us who come in after. The passing on is part of the coming alongside to help us understand where we are and where our congregation came from, which helps us grasp where we are going.

Naomi is a pinnacle example of this coming alongside. Ruth doesn’t know that there are literal laws through Moses to leave gleanings when bringing in the harvest. She decides to go out and do it anyway, with Naomi encouraging her given that she knows this is a relatively safe way to gather some food.

When it turns out that Ruth lucks out and lands in fields belonging to Boaz, one of Naomi’s relations and who could step in and help them, things take a turn. Boaz notices her and asks about her. Upon finding out of Ruth’s faithfulness to Naomi he treats her with unusual kindness. Once again, let’s look at this in context. Naomi’s character inspired devotion from Ruth. Ruth walks with her, and is committed to assimilate into a new culture and people. Her faithfulness is noted, and her devotion marks her positively with Boaz who honors that with favor.

When Naomi finds out it’s Boaz Ruth has been talking with, she gives her some advice. It is once again playing to expectations in Israel that Ruth wouldn’t know. Without getting into details, she tells Ruth to meet up with Boaz at night after he’s had some cocktails. She knows the advice she is giving will put Boaz, a man of honor, in a position to make good on a marriage offer. There were a few ways to “become married” in ancient Israel. One was to engage in certain conjugal activities. Which is likely why Naomi knew that Boaz would “settle the matter” quickly.

There was one relative closer to Naomi than Boaz who would have claim to her dead husband’s land and to Ruth as well. Boaz had to figure out how to get him to forego his rights to property so he himself could claim it. He offers the land first, but then adds that Ruth, the Moabite comes with it. Remember, this whole foreign sensibility of the Moabite was distasteful, and in this case might interfere with the other man’s own inheritance otherwise. So he relinquishes and Boaz take the land and Ruth as his wife.

The story ends with a kind of “happily ever after”.

It happens this way because of the fullness of invitation, coming alongside, and willingness to embrace a new culture. Naomi called Ruth by example and led her through the newness of a new culture, AND a new faith. Ruth listened and stayed true to the instruction of one who knew better and more about what it meant to follow God and be an Israelite.

All of us are still in the process of becoming as we walk this Christian path. We do well to find the Naomis in our lives to lead us and show us those aspects of faith and life we haven’t mastered yet. And we do well to live our lives faithfully in

such a manner that people just by our example want to know more and want to have what we have. I am somewhat convinced that many people live inspiring lives, and what stops the transmission of why that life is what it is resides in a humility that doesn't want to accept that someone might be looking up to them and open to their leadership. Find your Ruths. Who knows what kind of greatness and goodness might come. Who knows how powerfully transformed a life might become as a result. In the case of Ruth, she was nothing less than part of the lineage that brought about the birth of Jesus.

## BIBLE STUDY Romans 2

As we move into chapter 2, we begin to see something very key to this letter. We can't take it one verse at a time. We can't take it one paragraph at a time. We're going to have to be patient. Emerging are multiple different groups being addressed in this correspondence. Clearly the target of the previous chapter at the end are Gentile Christians. These are those coming out of pagan, idolatrous Rome into Christianity. What were the issues with their idolatry? How did it cause them to fall away from acting in accordance with the desires of God?

This chapter opens with a very clear sense of hypocrisy and judgement thereof. Condemnation of sin oneself is already committing. How can we speak out against what we ourselves are guilty of? For many this isn't an issue. In fact, it's a necessity to distract from their own misdeeds. Accuse someone else of the same thing, then everyone will look at that person rather than me. If I can fool everyone from seeing the truth, then I get away free and clear.

Paul reminds us clearly that this isn't the case. God is aware of all that goes on and will mete out accountability justly and rightly. Truth here has a couple sensibilities. Truth is the truth of what we do in both public and secret. God knows both and all, and so God will judge according to the truth of what is, not what we allow others to see. Similarly, there is truth to what is and is not correct before God. Once again, God isn't interested in how humanity shifts and shades genuine correctness before God to accommodate its own preferences. God is interested in God's ultimate truth, and how humanity seeks and lives into it.

In the end, we all will be judged along these lines. Not our own. Not other people's. God's. And so we do well to recognize what those lines are. As we'll see going on it's not about "earning" salvation. It's about whether our not our claim to salvation is legitimate and borne out in our actions.

This is just the beginning of Paul's discussion. For Paul, ultimately there is nothing but the Christian. Jew, Gentile, both have baggage. The question is how it translates into and affects a relationship with Jesus. Is their sense of faith in name only? Is it genuine? Have they let Christ into their heart to do transforming work or are they just claiming a status in name only?

All of these are relevant questions.

The next comments about seeking vs. self-seeking are telling. It's not so much about a set of legal rights and wrongs for the Christian. The question is what and why are we seeking? Are we seeking to glorify God and make more disciples or are we only worried about our personal reputation? Ultimately the self-seeking leads to dominant sin while hopefully seeking the goodness of God leads to a decreasing sin.

Neither are favorable, but each action does their own to funnel our actions into the realm of sin if we allow it. The difference is in the intention. If we intend towards honor and the glory of God, at least we are intending in the right direction. To allow selfishness to drive our ambitions and actions is to certainly not only move towards sinfulness, but to do so intentionally and willfully.

Paul makes an important distinction here. Acting with right intent makes a difference. None of us will ever be sin free. We'll always make mistakes somewhere. That said, having the right intention puts us continually in the right direction. Putting self first continually puts us in the wrong one. In other words, a legalistic approach will regularly lead us astray as it's about a dialed in and sometimes loopholed action as opposed to a correct intent that might miss the point on how to act rightly. One finds the reason to act wrong by feigning to do right, the other makes an honest mistake while genuinely seeking right.

Next comes a bit that's a little squirrely section for Paul. He starts by talking about doing right with or without the Law. Doing evil first for the Jew then the Gentile. This is the equality of it all. He puts Jew first then Gentile for both reward and punishment. In other words it doesn't matter who we are, God will hold all accountable.

He also addresses something odd, though he doesn't yet render judgement on it. There are Gentiles who because they have a sense of connection to God do what God wants us to do innately, yet there are Jews who have the Law, the instruction, of God and choose to disobey. Who is correct?

We'll see how this pans out later according to Paul, meaning the letter is cohesive and builds as it goes. But it does pose to us our own question. Is it possible to hear the voice of Jesus in the heart, respond it, and never give language to salvation simply due to a lack of education rather than reality of desire? This doesn't question the sufficiency of Christ. Rather it challenges us to wrestle with our own judgement on those around the world even as we address the real issue of ignoring Christ amidst our own context. Which Paul complicates very soon.

This goes into the idea of nature. We have a nature to go both towards and away from the Law of God all at once. Both are sinful. The common denominator for all is the need for a Savior, who is Jesus.

Paul hits here the Gentile who is refusing faith, the Jew who embraces faith but ignores it, the Jew who hears faith and embraces it but misunderstands the relation between being "Chosen" and actually living into their Choseness. This is not a one sided reckoning. Paul is reminding that there is an equal reckoning for Jew and Gentile alike, and that even apart from Christ both have the Law of God written on the heart. How do we know? Because both are capable given their mutual ability to live into it. At the same time both are incapable given their mutual ability to violate it.

Still, how much more significant those who violate it having been taught it, versus those who have never been taught it?

Paul's impartiality comes clear now as he moves on. He now mirrors and maybe even amplifies the sense of obedience and disobedience on the Jews. His instruction is even more amplified to us as we witness the fallout in our own day and age on actual Christianity overall.

Paul first cites that the Jews know the Law but don't do it. They are the people of God and intended to shine God's desire into the world but fall drastically short of doing so. How can the world have any clue of what God wants from it if the people of the One who created it don't embody what that looks like? That's a legitimate criticism. And the result is no one gave their faith a fair shake because the people never actually embodied its sensibilities.

No different the Jews back then. If there were any who agreed to Jesus' Messiah status, who could be believed? If the bulk were practicing out loud their moral superiority of their own Law, but everyone knew they weren't following it in action, how could they claim credibility? There was none. They fell hollow both because they denied the Messiah's identity and, because even if they acknowledged Him in name they denied Him in action. The love, grace, and compassion were absent.

Just as Paul deconstructs the Gentile sense of superiority because of how their mistaken sense of religion lead them to sin, so Paul now does the same for the Jews. Yes, they have the Law. But simply having the Law isn't the same as obeying it. Just knowing the Jews are the people of God isn't same as acting as the People of God. Faith isn't about inheritance, it's about living it out. The Jews missed it in how they didn't recognize the Messiah and live into relationship with Him. The Gentiles didn't recognize it as they never even had a knowledge or concept of the Messiah.

Who was the more guilty? The ones who knew or the ones who didn't? Today, who is more guilty, the one who knows and doesn't exemplify it or the one who never knew to begin with?

The instruction then is no less imperative than today. Paul is telling the Jews, the "chosen ones", that they aren't demonstrating their status because they continually violate God's expectations. The ones who are claiming superiority are denying it by acting in a way that violates their own God's expectations while judging others unworthy by violating the same rules the ones they judge violate.

Paul is speaking to Jew and Gentile alike here. There is a right and wrong. It is revealed in Christ and expected by God. It isn't something we'll ever be perfect in. We'll strive for it to the grave. The question is whether or not we're striving. Doing the "right thing" with wrong motive is just as wrong as doing wrong. Making a mistake when genuinely striving to do right is preferable by far.

This becomes very evident as Paul transitions to dealing with Jews, and particularly Jewish Christians who are just as misguided as Gentiles who may think that they can keep on with pagan practices while professing Jesus verbally. The Jews who have the Law at their back are no better than any one else. HAVING the Law and FOLLOWING the Law are two completely different things. This is what Paul hammers on them about. Because God shows no favorites in Christ, just because someone has their Jewishness as a heritage doesn't place them above anyone else.

Claiming the Law as a gift doesn't carry any weight because if we see this letter in conjunction with Paul's other letters we know that the Law doesn't necessarily confer anything on anyone. Why? Because no one can follow it in its completeness. Keep in mind here that when Paul talks about Gentiles following the Law because it's written on their hearts this inability to follow it completely still reigns.

There is a piece to this chapter that we have to credit to Paul in his overarching message but nevertheless poses an honest question. Paul puts EVERYONE in equal before God's judgement. Jew or Gentile doesn't matter. It's now about submission to Christ.

That said, and this isn't Paul but my own curiosity, but what does this mean about submission? Here we see that there is at least some sense of Biblical acknowledgement that the Spirit can work in the hearts of those who haven't known the gospel to behave in a very gospel manner nonetheless. It begs the question. Is salvation about just giving the right verbiage to salvation with no action to follow? Or is it about response? Responding to the Christ speaking to our heart and surrendering to that Spirit despite what is happening around us?

That's a sticky question I know. But it's one worth asking if we truly believe that faith isn't a mere acknowledgement of Jesus dying on the cross but also the power revealed in His resurrection and the Holy Spirit having a transforming

presence in our hearts and more significantly our lives.

What Paul is touching on here is something plaguing Christianity today. The Jews then were supposed to be a Godly example to the non-Jew of what it looked like, at least, what it looked like to live rightly before God. They weren't and so the heads up from Paul. "Hey, you're supposed to be the 'chosen ones', why don't you ACT like it?"

This is a strikingly present sentiment. SO many people who refuse to identify with Christ do so because of their experience with Christians. They know Jesus is compassionate, gracious, kind and welcoming. They meet with harsh, judgemental, hypocritical, and condemning on the basis of self-appointed measures over God appointed measures. It's up to us to counter that with the Biblical Spirit of Christ. Welcoming into our midst because we're all broken people. Ushering them into the presence of God. Allowing that God will do the transforming, not us, over time. And what transforms first and so one isn't up to us. It's the SEEKING and transforming moment to moment that is the issue. It's not OUR agenda and timeline. It's GOD'S.

The closing verses about circumcision are simple and very real. The idea of circumcision was to set someone apart as part of God's people. It was a physical act. Paul very emphatically instructs that physical circumcision holds no value. What holds value is the condition of the heart and the fruit of one's life. These are the key elements in determining whether one belongs to God. If "Jew" is synonymous with being one of God's people, then "Jewishness" is no longer, if it ever was, connected to some physical rite or act. It is connected to the heart, to the spirit, to the life lived. There is no Jew nor Gentile. All are one before God, all will be measured by God on their own merits, and those merits are exemplified in Christ who direct us Spirit ward, not fleshward.