

“Put Love First” based on Ruth 1:1-18, Mark 12:28-34

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on October 31, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

On Friday, the employees of Shelby Presbyterian were offered a wonderful gift. Our own June Hobbs and former Shelby Star Reporter Joe DePriest, the authors of a forthcoming book about our city’s ‘Sunset Cemetery,’ gave church and Rainbow Connection staff a tour of the cemetery. This cemetery is a treasure trove of history and beautiful stories, which June and Joe have so beautifully curated and cared for, and their work will be published in the near future, complete with photos by our own Hal Bryant.

Now, during the tour, we stopped by the grave of a woman named Betty Singleton Holdridge, who died in October 1954, some 67 years ago, while in town working at the county fair. Betty had broken her shoulder in a fall about six weeks earlier while touring, but continued to work the carnival, in pain, a pain that was largely ignored. It was ignored until a local woman named Valda Hord noticed it. You see, Valda loved the fair and had made friends with Betty in the previous year and went that day to see her again.

As Joe told the story, when Valda went into the tent and saw Betty there, she saw two tears, a drop on either cheek, streaming down the woman’s face, as Betty sat on a platform. Valda asked what was wrong and approached her suffering friend. Betty took Valda’s hand and squeezed it, explained to her about her pain, and Valda sprang into action, getting help immediately for Betty. An ambulance came for her and brought her to the hospital. News spread and locals sent cards and well-wishes, but in just a few days, on Oct. 7, Betty died.

What’s most amazing to me in this tragic story is that Valda didn’t know Betty’s name then, she only knew her as the carnival’s ‘Fat Lady,’ a 600lb performer in sideshow tent, but Valda nonetheless saw her as a human being in need of love and compassion.

In today’s first reading, which Carolyn read this morning, from the gospel of Mark, we find Jesus wrapping up his discourse with religious elites when a scribe approaches. The scribe is impressed by the answers Jesus has given to all the others so far. King Herod’s loyalists, the populist Pharisees, and the elite Sadducees, all members of the ruling class in Judea, have been trying to trip Jesus up at this point in Mark’s gospel. Now, a scribe, a lawyer, an interpreter of Jewish law, has a question – of all of God’s commands, all the law, what is the most important, the first command?

The great commandment is found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but each presents it differently. In Matthew and Luke, the question is posed as antagonistic, a challenge to Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus gives the answer, but in Luke, Jesus makes the scribe answer. Yet, here in Mark we find a scribe portrayed as seeking, as earnest. He continues a line of unexpected followers in Mark’s gospel, who seem to ‘get it,’ even when the apostles don’t. He seems to understand Jesus.

So, when Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul (being/identity), your mind and your strength, it is familiar to him. It’s a verse known so well it’s called the ‘Shema,’ which likely he, along with many Jews prayed daily. It seems to

confirm what the scribe knew, and so when Jesus adds from Leviticus, to love your neighbor, the scribe affirms Jesus.

This affirmation is more than just this scribe giving a plain response of 'good answer,' but what he says undermines those questioners before him – Herodians, Pharisees and Sadducees. He says, 'This is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.' It's more important than the big things, the big displays of faithfulness and piety. The Scribe is placing Jesus in the prophetic tradition against the leaders, and so, when Jesus tells him he is close to the Kingdom of God, Jesus grants the scribe what he has not granted the others: inclusion. In this way, he essentially calls on the scribe to recognize him as Messiah and challenges him to practice what he preached.

In Valda's attempt to help alleviate the pain she saw Betty suffering that day, and in her continued remembrance of Betty, every year putting flowers at her grave, and in her telling of Betty's story, her search for Betty's name and identity, and ultimately, in the placement of a grave marker over Betty's tomb, we see Valda near to the Kingdom of God. She is near to the heart of Jesus, loving her neighbor, someone she barely knew but in passing, and putting into practice this command in a simple way. Through love she is revealing God in the day to day, in the hardships, and in the joys of life.

This is the foundation of the story of Ruth – God's presence in the love we share. Like Valda's loyalty to Betty, Ruth is also an example to every single one of us. This story exemplifies the presence of God in our everyday lives. You see, there is no miracle in Ruth, and no divine appearance. The presence of God is reflected by the people in the story, through their faithfulness and love, integrity and generosity, their boldness and loyalty, even in the face of tragedy. This is a story about the simple choices we make, in how we love and live together.

For both Ruth and Orpah, there is no easy decision when Naomi decides to return to Judah. To be a widow is hard enough, but a widow in the ancient world and in a foreign land, well, that is about as hard as it can be. You can see why Naomi wants to go. Both Orpah and Ruth are ready to go with Naomi, even though for them, they are putting themselves in the very situation Naomi is fleeing in Moab. And so, after they start off with Naomi, she sends them back. Orpah does what is reasonable, safe, and expected, but Ruth clings, or cleaves, or holds on to Naomi. She vows her utter and complete loyalty. Where you go, I'll go.

In the short term, Ruth has the security of Naomi, but Naomi is not young, and so, she leaves knowing that at some point, Naomi will die, and Ruth will be alone. I think the key to understanding this story and applying it to our lives is how we frame it. Too often in our culture, we try to find the heroic, and pin our hopes on grand gestures. And it's tempting to do that with Ruth's decision to go with Naomi. However, the decision itself isn't a grand gesture of loyalty. In the very short-term it's self-preservation.

What is most amazing about Ruth's decision, is not her decision to go, but her vow. Ruth lays down her whole identity. She vows, 'Where you go, I'll go. Where you stay, I will stay, your people shall be my people, and your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die, and I will be

buried there. May the Lord do to me also more, if anything, but death, separates me from you.’ She invokes the name of Naomi’s God, the God of Israel, in her vow. She chooses to make Naomi and Naomi’s God her priority. She is vulnerable and makes herself even more vulnerable. Ruth goes where she is a foreigner and a widow and vows complete loyalty to her mother-in-law.

This loyalty is recognized by Boaz, who as you may know, is a farmer who marries Ruth. But Ruth’s loyalty isn’t recognized because she comes to town as Naomi’s savior, but because Ruth again puts herself at risk, going out to gather food for them. Ruth stands out to Boaz through her continued love and care for Naomi. It’s not the grand gesture, but the everyday love and concern she shows that reveals the presence of God in this story. Even at the end, when Boaz redeems Ruth, we may be tempted to see this as a grand gesture here too, but ultimately, Boaz is choosing to do something no one else wants to do – He’s redeeming a foreigner.

In the retelling of their stories, we can be tempted to make heroic tales of Valda and Ruth. But in truth, they chose to do the next right thing that was placed before them. It was the next opportunity to love. They chose love. They put that first and responded. All we can control in our life is our response to the good times and the bad. They responded as was needed. There is no miraculous presence of God in either story, but the presence of God is known by the faithfulness, and love of the people involved, their integrity, generosity, boldness and loyalty in the face of tragedy. In both instances, they simply put love first.

My sisters and brothers, this is the calling we have in our lives – we are to put love first. This draws us near to the Kingdom of God as Jesus told the scribe who questioned him. Jesus has already done the heavy lift. The grand gesture is done by the God who shared in our humanity to live as we live, die for us and rise again for us. God has done in Christ, what we could not do for ourselves, and so the law is fulfilled.

We have been prepared by this for God’s Holy Spirit to live in and among us now with our hearts as temples. By this share in the ministry of reconciliation not by matching the grand gesture of Christ, but by matching the love that fuels it. We love one another in order to change this world for the better. Our role to play in this reconciliation is not the heavy lift, but the simple act of loving first. Every decision we make in our lives to love God and love our neighbor, this brings the Kingdom of God near because it reveals God’s presence in us.

Ruth’s simple acts of loyalty and love were not great by her design, but used by God to have her share in the redemption of the world, as an ancestor to King David and ultimately to Jesus, as well as our ancestor in the faith. The book of Ruth is an opportunity for us to see that our small decisions each day, the ones we make in love for God and love for neighbor, are truly a part of God’s greater plan for redemption of the whole world. Whatever we do in love for God and neighbor reconciles the world to God.

What I love about the story of Valda and Betty is what it reveals about love and good works. On Reformation Day we need to talk about faith and works in some way. Where the world paraded Betty as a sideshow, Valda saw in her a human being. And when Betty had died, Valda took the time each year to remember her. None of this seems as though it could have been for Valda’s

personal gain to earn salvation or anything else, but simply done out of love, out of care and compassion.

I don't know Valda, but like Ruth, I believe she likely did not act thinking of what she might receive, or even that she was actively working to change the world. Nor do I think that she was acting in an effort to earn her own salvation. I think she acted out of love and concern for this person she saw suffering, who she saw as her equal, valuable to her as a human being.

I think we all have a lot to learn from Ruth and from Valda, about living out the command that Jesus gave the scribe, about loving the Lord with all that we have, and loving our neighbors, those we know well, and those we barely know too but God has put in our lives. This is about loving all neighbors, as we love ourselves. Amen.