

Place: Church of the Cross, Modesto CA

Date/Occasion: 12 Pentecost, 31 Aug 2014 (sermon on Biblical Story from CVP)

Readings: John 6:35-51 [PPT2 /1-2]

Text: Ruth 1:1-17 [PPT3/ 1]

Theme: Join the work of the Spirit.

Goal: That people examine their attitude towards the pathway and make a choice to follow it.

Title: Drawing Power Needed

Congregation of Jesus Christ, dear brothers and sisters, [2]

I'm going to start by saying what you can also read in the bulletin. On June 1 we had a congregational meeting or workshop to discover a story in the Bible that illustrates where we are right now as a congregation. We did this as a step on the Congregational Vitality Pathway. On the pathway we are seeking to become a church that more strongly seeks Jesus himself and Jesus' priorities in the world. [3] Healthy (pursuing Christ), missional (pursuing Christ's priorities).

Choosing a story, or having a story isn't going to make us more healthy or missional in itself, but by going through the process together of searching the scriptures and discussing ourselves in the light of the Bible we created an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work in us so that we become more Word centered, more joined together in community, more like Christ, all those things we must be to be healthy and missional. [4]

On the pathway the process is more important than any particular result because it is the process, by being involved with each other, that is where and how true change happens! There the Holy Spirit works on us individually in relation to each other. So the *process* of discovering the story was more

important than the story that came out of it. If we were to do the process again next year the story will likely and hopefully be different. [5]

The story that came out of the process is the story of Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah turning onto the road, the pathway to Bethlehem. We have looked at this story before to see what it says about God and how he works. This morning we will touch on that again, but this time using the three women on the pathway to Bethlehem to illustrate the different attitudes alive at Church of the Cross as we set out on the congregational vitality pathway.

First let's get the canonical and historical context of our story. Canonical context is what is its place in the Bible, why is the book Ruth in the Bible? With the book Ruth - answering *that* question - also gives us the historical context, telling us what the time of Ruth was like.

So first, what is the main reason the book Ruth is in the Bible? All you have to do is read the first and last verse of the book and you can figure it out. The book Ruth begins with these words: "In the days when the judges ruled." It's the time of the Judges. [6-1] What was that time? What was it like? Read the book of Judges and you will know it was a very dark time. You were no safer in Israel (the church) than in Sodom. Remember how the angels visiting Lot were accosted in Sodom. Well, that's how things had become also in Isarel. You weren't safe.

There are two refrains running through the book of the judges. The first is that: [6-2] everyone does what is right in their own eyes." Yes, that is how

it was in the world. But during the time of the judges that's also how it was in the church. People lived according to their own insights and desires rather than God's Word, whether they were ordinary members, or elders or priests. Read the last chapters of Judges and your hair will stand on end. You will see there was certainly nothing of a compelling Christian community or any other kind of community and you can go right down the line with all the other characteristics the Bible gives for healthy and missional. Israel wasn't healthy, she didn't pursue God, and Israel certainly wasn't missional, she didn't pursue God's priorities in the world. Their own lives and desires came first. That was their priority. That's *one* refrain in the book of judges: Everyone did what was right in their own eyes.

The *other* refrain in the book of Judges is that there was no King in Israel. [6-3] What Israel needed, what the church needed was a king to make an end of the anarchy and injustice, a king to mold the people into a people, a community, a king to transform them. The dark days of the judges called out for that king. And that brings us to the last verse of the book of Ruth. [7-1] It tells that Ruth and Boaz were the parents of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of...David! The book Ruth shows God giving an answer to this call for a king. God shows that he is at work in the darkness, to end the darkness. [7-2] In this family story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz God is working for king David. [7-3]

More than that, God is here laying the groundwork for the true King after his heart, the great Son of David, Jesus Christ, [7-4] who will sit on the throne forever and who will submit all enemies under his feet. The King the darkness in our world and in our lives calls out for.

It is he who overcomes the dead-end of our inability to live for God. He blasts open the dead end of sin by his death and resurrection, opening a road to daily living for God. By his death and resurrection he earned for us the very Spirit of God to live and rule from within our own hearts to so overcome our inability to be God's people from the inside out.

Only he has the power to pour out the Spirit to mould ego-centric people into a community of love and service. And Acts 2 describes the community this King forms by his Spirit: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." The exact opposite of the situation in the book of Judges. The book of Ruth is about God coming to our aid to provide this King through whom is this fellowship, this shalom.

That's the line running through this story. It's why Ruth is in the Bible. God is working through this family going through hard times in a dark time on his plan. We have in this family story a piece of the story of the birth of the Lord Jesus. Of God's work so that a dead people can come alive. So that an unhealthy church can be full of health and vitality. So that a people who don't

seek God and God's priorities become a people who do seek God and his priorities. A people which is healthy and missional.

That's where it all ultimately leads. And that's what we are seeking for ourselves here at Church of the Cross. We want to be a people, a church that is healthy and missional, we want to be a church that seeks Christ and his priorities in the world.

[8] That ultimately is the end of the pathway which Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah step onto in chapter 1 verse 7. The announcement had come that there is bread in Bethlehem and they get up and go; and because we also have heard there is bread in Bethlehem, bread in a much deeper sense, we too have stepped onto the pathway. But though we here at Church of the Cross are on the pathway together, we aren't on it necessarily united in faith and hope and love. We are of different mindsets like Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. [9]

Naomi. She steps onto the path, takes the pathway but devoid of faith, hope and love. She is bitter, cynical and skeptical. She believes in God but has no trust in God. She has been through a lot. She has lost a lot. Her husband and both her sons. They as a family have lost their place in Israel. And the announcement of bread, though it somehow gets her moving, doesn't reignite her faith or hope. The family's inheritance is not coming back. There's really nothing to go back to.

On top of that if there were, there's no family left to inherit. A double blow. No inheritance and no inheritors. Naomi does have two daughter-in-laws traveling with her but she doesn't even see them as family but as burdens to get rid of.

She tells them to go back. To not bother to walk the pathway. It won't lead to anything for them. The pathway according to Naomi is a dead end. When they refuse she comes with hard logical arguments laced with sarcasm. You may remember what Naomi's arguments are referring to from the last time we read this book. It was God's will that no family was ever to lose its land or place in Israel. God intended that to be an earthly picture of our inheritance in heaven kept for us and our own being kept for that inheritance (1 Peter 1:5-6). God taught that to Israel by requiring that family land could never be permanently sold, it always had to be returned to the original family. And no family was allowed to die out, if a man died without an heir, his brother would have to marry his widow and the first son of that union would be the heir of the deceased husband. These Old Testament laws no longer have to be followed but God wanted to teach by these commandments about us and our inheritance remains just as true today as 3000 years ago. But Naomi doesn't believe it. She has no sons left and is too old to bear more sons, and even if she could, would Ruth and Naomi wait 20 years. It's over for her and her family in Israel. That's why she says the Lord's hand has gone out against her.

Naomi, though she believes there is a God, has no faith in him. She speaks as one with no faith, whose faith has burned out, who sees no possibilities other than purely *human* possibilities, and so is left only with objections. Resorting in the end even to ridicule.

Naomi has nothing good to say about God and his people. She doesn't give a single ray of light to these two women who wish to accompany her to the promised land.

Naomi's mindset can also easily be among us in general and with respect to the vitality pathway in particular. We consider ourselves realists. We see all kinds of things that are wrong but have given up hope. Nothing works. Natural Church Development didn't get us anywhere. Congregational Vitality is just the present flavor of the month. It won't bring us anywhere.

And then we can sometimes speak about serving God and about the church in a way where nothing shines out of our words. But such talk only compounds the problem we are complaining about. Because outsiders (to say nothing of our children) get a negative view of God and the church. Negativity has little drawing power. It stands in the way of a church attracting outsiders. It drives people away. An anti-witness.

Yes, realism is necessary, but realism without faith leads to despair. And that's Naomi. No, we certainly don't have to whitewash things in the church, but we do have to speak with faith and trust in God, we do have to speak with love. When outsiders hear members complain and be down on the church, they

aren't going to be interested in becoming part of that church. Whereas a positive attitude about serving God and enthusiasm for the church and for participating in the life of the congregation, that attracts, that draws. That's a witness. What if Naomi had said to Orpah and Ruth: It will be hard, weigh the cost, it won't be easy, but God is giving bread in Bethlehem. That's a sign of his favor and his favor far outweighs and overcomes any difficulty.

So far Naomi. Now Orpah. [10] We can be brief. Orpah lets herself be convinced by Naomi not to continue on the pathway. Now I don't absolve Naomi for what she said and did, but Orpah can't lay the blame entirely on Naomi when she turns back. She lived 10 years in Naomi's family. She knew more about the Lord than just these words of Naomi. She had lived long enough in this god-fearing family, imperfect as it was. She *also* bears responsibility for letting herself be sent away and bidding Naomi farewell. She can't say later: It's all Naomi's fault. Because let's be honest, we usually do what we want to do. We don't pay that much attention to others. We do what we want and use others as an excuse.

It often happens, that someone takes offense at something small and insignificant in the grand scheme of things and they leave the church entirely or join a different one. They blame so and so for such and such. They are the Orpah's. Some people's toes are so long no matter how you step you can't help but step on them. These are the people looking for reasons to leave. They

might be involved in something at church, but you won't ever see them at a congregational vitality event. They have no time for that. They aren't interested in something that might mean a deep personal change. The church can do what it wants, but preferably without their involvement. And if it looks as if they won't be able to avoid it, they will step out of the church altogether for somewhere else where they themselves won't be challenged to change.

That's Orpah. Naomi's on the pathway though she doesn't believe the pathway leads anywhere. Orpah's don't bother with it at all.

Now Ruth. [11] Naomi uses Orpah's departure to encourage Ruth to do the same. To return to *her* people and *her* gods. That's a shocking thing for a church member to say, that's a total denial of the faith. But Ruth perseveres despite Naomi, just as sometimes people join the church despite the church, despite the worldly manner some speak over God and his service! Jesus says in that passage we read from John: "No one comes to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." That's a strong word, draw, pull. The Father pulls through everything, nothing can stop his pulling. How can it be that a person despite all obstacles still comes. Truly swims against the current. How is that the one due to the misery of the church (which you can indeed fill a whole book of Judges with), the one turns away, but the other says: I'm going with you?!

[12]

That is a miracle, a work of God. Here you have the saving power of the coming King who rescues us from our inability, the prison of our own hearts. He has not yet come, but here in the story of his coming, his power is already visible. The Spirit of Christ is already at work.

Naomi does all she can to prevent getting a sister in the Lord. It is God's work that Ruth doesn't let Naomi intimidate her. Listen to what she says: "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you." She basically tells Naomi "that's enough of that kind of talk. It's time for you to stop."

"Where you go, and where you stay I will stay." In other words: I'm coming with you. Period.

Then: "Your people will be my people and your God my God." Notice, not Your God is my God and we'll see later about that people." No, "your people will be my people," that first, the hardest and rightly so because those who choose for God can't do so without also choosing for his people. Jesus and the church aren't available separately. They are a package deal. That doesn't mean you have to call the crooked straight, absolutely not! But you do have to gain that sense of belonging, of being a part, whereby then you can also speak in love criticism where necessary.

And then: "Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried." Here you see that choosing for God and his service is a choice for life, that it is an unconditional choice. Not: for as long as you (Naomi) live and then I go back,

for as long as there is a partner, for as long as it works out for me, but I personally choose for God, in life and death.

That's how Ruth embarks on the pathway in spite of the argument church people are and make to stay away. What a wonder that God can still bring people to him in circumstances like that. That is of course no excuse for Naomi or us to be unconcerned about our attitude and how we speak to outsiders. On the contrary, it admonishes us as witnesses because we see here God's amazing power to save. If God can save when people work against him, just think what can be done when we work with him, as imperfect our efforts are.

The mindset of Naomi and of Orpah is among us, but so is the mindset of Ruth. Sometimes these mindsets are in different people. Sometimes one person can waver between these mindsets. But many here just as committedly as Ruth have said I need to seek Christ, pursue him. I need to change. Make him number one and pursue his priorities in the world. And in the face of nay-sayers embark on the congregational vitality pathway. That's a work of the Christ through his Holy Spirit.

Three women start on a pathway but with different mindsets, different attitudes. [13-1] The pathway unbeknown to them ends in the coming of their and your and my Savior, in the establishment of the Christian congregation. They aren't there yet. They are just starting. When you read the rest of the book, you will see there was nothing glamorous in what they do, but the nitty

grittyness of faithfulness in small things, with Ruth for example going to work in the fields as a gleaner, but also taking risks in faith, by making an appeal to Boaz. All of that is outside the realm of our text this morning, but I mention it to say there is **[13-2]** no magic pill, there is no quick fix, the pathway is lifelong and it requires our engagement. **[13-3]** Ruth did that, she was faithful in the little things as hard as it was, but it led to a change **[13-4]** in Naomi, it led to a king in Israel, a change in Israel and it led to Jesus Christ and the outpouring of his Spirit. And it will lead to the changing of the whole world. **[14]**

Don't you want to be a part of that? Share in that? Join us in pursuing Christ and his priorities. Each one of us needs him and the power of his Spirit in our life. To cover the darkness in our life before God and to shine his healing light in that darkness so that we begin to change, become light like him. He promises us that if we ask for his Spirit, we will receive it. Empty yourself before him and ask him for his Spirit. Get on *his* pathway to a renewed world.