

## **You Shall Love...**

Ruth 1:1-18

Mark 12: 28-34

November 4, 2012

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

With this weekend, with this service of worship, with the sermon that I am even now beginning to preach, and with your vote following the service, we begin our relationship as congregation and pastor. So, where do I begin? How do I begin? What sort of sermon will get our relationship off to a good beginning? These are questions I've been asking myself!

After the hurricane subsided on Tuesday, some friends of ours came over from Long Island with the contents of their freezer, their dog, their kids, and some toothbrushes. Over dinner, we were talking about Bloomfield and this big Sunday coming up. "What will you preach about?" they wanted to know. The hurricane? Climate change? Leadership? The election? Reeling from their own experiences, they came up with about eight sermons worth of material they thought I should cover. So I hope you had a good strong cup of coffee before you came, because we could be here for a while!

Where to begin. How to begin. You are a historic church. Sandy was an historic weather event. And the day after tomorrow at the polls, we'll make some more history with the votes we cast in the general election. I could "go big"--talk about how we are writing history by the choices we make, that sort of thing. But for our first Sunday together, I think--I guess--we are all more interested in just getting a sense of each other and of what kind of relationship ours will be in the years ahead.

Besides, when it comes to preaching, the driving question is not what the preacher wants to talk about, but what God is saying to us through the scriptures. You heard them. Ruth chapter 1. Mark chapter 12.

**To a historic church and its pastoral candidate, on a momentous day, during turbulent times, God through the scriptures is saying:**

***You shall love.***

The full impact of Hurricane Sandy will not be known for some time, but initial reports indicate that it may prove to be the most damaging hurricane of all time. *Scientific American* tallied the statistics to date. 60 dead in the Caribbean, 80 dead in the United States. 7 1/2 million power outages. Waves just short of 40 feet high (that's the height of a 4-story building). An estimated \$50 billion in damages.

The topic trending during last night's "meet and greet" here in the parish house was, "did you or didn't you lose power?" When that all came that the Dalzell's power had just flickered back on, everybody was happy.

What shall we make of this unprecedented weather event? How shall we respond? We shall love. Just like always. Just as God's people have been directed to do and have been trying to learn to do for millennia:

*We shall love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and we shall love our neighbors as ourself.*

Bear in mind, writes New Testament scholar Douglas Hare, that "the primary component of biblical love is not affection but commitment." Loving God with all our heart is not about warm feelings but about stubborn commitment. *Stubborn commitment*. Anybody around here stubborn? That's good. Anybody around here committed? That's good. Now put those two together, and you've got love. Love in the biblical sense.

What do we make of the storm? Or, put differently, how shall we love God, neighbor and self in the wake of the storm? I personally would hope that the American public (and the Presbyterian Church) learns from Sandy to take concrete steps to forestall cataclysmic global warming. I personally hope to be part of ongoing relief efforts. What is your answer? In what concrete ways do you hope to show your stubborn commitment to God, neighbor and self in light of Sandy?

Getting to your polling place and casting your informed vote on Tuesday is a great place to start and worth whatever it takes in time, effort or inconvenience. Think of voting as a way of loving. In her lectionary blog, Heather Carlson encourages Christians to "vote as those caught up in the mission of loving our neighbour..." Vote for candidates who in your judgement will work with stubborn commitment (aka love) for the wellbeing of all God's people and not for short-term gain. I hope there will be 100% turnout from Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green on election day.

Presbyterians have a long history of civic involvement. Our United States government is modeled after Presbyterian church governance. We care about one another enough to care about what laws are passed and who they affect and how they are enforced. We participate in government as a matter of course, as an expression of our Christian faith.

In the plainest possible terms, *we vote because we love*. We are stubborn enough to vote because we are stubborn enough to love God, neighbor and self.

**To a historic church and its pastoral candidate, on a momentous day, during turbulent times, God through the scriptures is saying:**

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Speaking of "historic church", and "turbulent times," I would be remiss if I did not say a word about your lovely building. And your lovely scaffolding. I understand why we are

worshiping here, instead of there. The Designated Pastor Nominating Committee has talked me through the sequence of events several times over and, yes, the price tag, with the correct number of zeroes! I think it goes without saying that we will do everything we can to get the building repaired and open for worship again. The saints who have gone before us worked hard to bequeath a magnificent sanctuary to the town of Bloomfield, for the glory of God. We cannot let their labors be in vain. Whatever it takes is what it will take, and we will do it.

But this cannot be our first priority. Yes, you heard me right. It cannot be our first priority because our first priority is already taken. Already spoken for. Jesus made it clear as clear can be that the greatest commandment--and therefore our first priority--is to love God, to be stubbornly committed to God, with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength. And our second priority? Also taken. Jesus said, "the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

On our list of possible priorities, #1 and #2 are already filled in and are non-negotiable. We *shall* love God, neighbor and self with stubborn, fierce, hands-on, active, tireless commitment. The good news is we can do that in any setting, anywhere, from a catacomb to a cathedral, as Christians have been doing or trying to do all these years.

In our Gospel reading, the scribe whose question Jesus was answering agreed with Jesus, which is noteworthy, because most of the time in the Gospels, most of the scribes are described as being hostile to Jesus, bent on tripping him up to discredit him. But the unnamed scribe in Mark chapter 12 agrees with Jesus. Yes, these are the two greatest commandments, he says, and in summarizing them he adds his own "two cents", saying that observing these two great commandments "is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

In other words, how we live--loving God, neighbor and self--is "much more important" than the mechanics of how we worship. Whole burnt offerings and sacrifices were terribly important religious practices in the Jewish and before that the Israelite faith tradition. Going to the temple and offering a dove or a lamb to God was deeply meaningful. The practice of offering temple sacrifices was embedded in the culture and belief system of the scribes and of Jesus himself, and had layers of meaning.

Remarkably, our Gospel story today focuses on one scribe who was clearheaded enough to realize that how God's people live is actually more important than the religious rituals they observe. "Much more important" is what he says, and Jesus commends him for his wisdom.

Repairing the sanctuary building will be a big job and will require a great deal of attention and resources, but it can never climb higher than 3rd place on our list of priorities. We will need to remind each other of that in the months to come. I will need reminding.

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You heard me say in the children's message a few words about how I think about my call to serve Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green. As I said to the children, I am named after Ruth in the Bible, and I have always taken a special interest in that tiny book in the Old Testament sandwiched between the bloody battles of Joshua and Judges, and stories of monarchy and more battles that follow in 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings. I like how Ruth--a foreigner--showed "extraordinary kindness" (love) to her mother-in-law Naomi, and how God showed "extraordinary kindness" (love) to the two of them as the story unfolds, and I like being named after Ruth.

Despite sorrow and loss in my own life, God has shown me "extraordinary kindness" (love) in the two men in my life who are here with me right now: my husband Carlos and my son Daniel. I have never been able to imagine myself making the kind of choice Ruth makes in our story this morning. I guess I've always had more options and less to lose, less "on the line" than the vulnerable women in the ancient culture of the Bible.

Imagine my surprise when I first consulted the lectionary readings for today and found this passage assigned for my candidating Sunday here. Ruth, chapter 1! The story of my faith hero making her extraordinary choice to do the unexpected thing.

So, I've crossed the river, and I come to you as a stranger, but your God is my God, and our priorities are the same--our top two priorities, anyway. All that is left for me to say I learned from my faith hero and namesake who promised her mother-in-law, "your people will be my people."

I'm not a perfect person, and I will make mistakes and occasionally disappoint you, I am sure. But I have said yes to God's call and to the Designated Pastor Nominating Committee's invitation to be your pastor. In moving forward together, your people will be my people.

Together, we will love...

To the glory of God. Amen.

*~Rev. Ruth Boling*

