

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, guest minister
Sunday, November 4, 2018
Lessons: Ruth 1:1-18 and Mark 12:28-34

MAKING IT REAL

What makes our New Testament lesson difficult is that it covers everything, which tempts us to make it a generality, lovely in sentiment but unspecified for any decision making in life. Left as a grand generality, this two-fold command to love God and my neighbor fails to challenge my priorities and so fails to change my daily living. To make Jesus' two-fold love command work, to make it real, we must sharpen its point.

How? I'll take my cue from the Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel. Talking about justice, Heschel contends that we do not need more people who love justice as a concept, an ideal, and grand generality. Instead, we need more people who will not allow themselves to feel comfortable with the particular injustices done to other people. We all smart from the sting of an injustice done to us. "It's not fair! It's wrong what they did to me!" We take the crucial next step when we allow empathy to make us feel the sting of an injustice done to someone else when its wrongness does not hurt us directly and personally, when, "It's no skin off my nose." Justice matters most when and where justice is being denied, especially when it is being denied to someone or some group that cannot fight back.

Likewise, the love Jesus commands stays comfortably fuzzy as long as I keep it general, unfocused and, therefore, harmless. As a pretty sentiment, love troubles no one, except, maybe, the unloved or the hated. To make real the love for neighbor Jesus demands from me, I must think, speak, and act counter to *unlove*. Yes, I realize "unlove" is not a word, but it is a reality, and we need to recognize its reality because unlove includes, not only hate, but also indifference. Hate sends the bombs or the poison, fires the shots, or kicks the person knocked down. Indifference ignores the injury and trauma hate inflicts. Indifference defends itself by blaming the victims – "They must have deserved it." Indifference refuses to feel empathy and thereby denies compassion.

Justice is made real when and where we confront an injustice. Love is made real when and where we confront unlove in ourselves, to be sure, but also in our communities, our society, and our world, and there is a lot of unlove at work in all three.

Across our land there are once vital towns or sections of cities that have sunk into decay, but people still live in those towns. Though never rich, many of those people were

proud (in the good sense) because they worked hard and were able to provide for their families and share with their neighbors. They were able to save some money every week or every month. They could send their children to college or trade school in hope of passing on a better future to their daughters and sons. Then, the jobs disappeared or were downgraded so their fortunes, though never large, were plundered. Some even had pensions. Today, speaking for their generation, my sons ask facetiously, “Dad, what does that word mean? What’s a pension?” For many, the pride was taken away.

I learned something very important from Donald L. Nathanson, a psychiatrist and theorist who lived here in Pennsylvania. He became a personal friend, until a stroke took him effectively away. Last spring I attended the memorial service for him. I will share now just one thin slice of what he, through his book, his video, and our conversations, helped me realize. I do not need to deserve shame in order to feel it. You, and I and everyone else can be made by life, by other people, or by circumstances beyond our control to suffer shame we do not deserve. Don developed what he called the “compass of shame” to help us understand our reactions to the shame family of emotions. His compass had four points, like a regular compass’s north, south, east, and west with, of course, plenty of room between the points for overlap. One of those compass points he named “attack other.” Strong experiences and feelings of being shamed can make me withdraw into myself, blame myself, or even despise myself (Don called that the “attack self” pole), or can make me avoid my feelings and the experiences that feed them. At that “avoidance” pole on the compass people drink too much, play video games too much, party too much, or do whatever else too much that enables them to avoid their circumstances and feelings. But at the “attack other” pole, anger can intensify into rage, especially when its fire is stoked by group rage and some other, vulnerable group is blamed. Then violence follows. Don theorized, and I believe he was correct, that very much of the violence in human societies has its deepest roots in shame. Fear also? Yes. Prejudices? Yes, to be sure. But deepest of all, shame.

Ruth and Orpah as well as Naomi herself have been plunged into shame which they do not deserve but which has overwhelmed them anyway. Their hopes have been dashed, their security removed, and their status in society diminished down to nothing. Naomi sees no future for herself and none for her daughters-in-law if they stay with her. Renaming herself “bitter,” she sends them back to their Moabite people, their mothers’ homes, and their gods. Her future had looked bright by the standards of her time, but now everything has been taken from her, and she has no hope left to share with the younger women.

Ruth is remarkable. She stands out even in the Bible. Abraham, the father of God’s people chosen to represent God’s love, justice, and mercy in the world, leaves his home and family behind because he has a promise from God for a new land and many descendants. Ruth has no promise from anyone, certainly not from God. Without promise, without hope,

Ruth commits herself to her mother-in-law Naomi, to Naomi's people, and to Naomi's God for as long as she lives and even in death.

Unsurprisingly, Ruth has been presented as the model proselyte, the ideal convert to Judaism, but let me suggest another, harder lesson from her story, a lesson potentially more useful for us. As an infant, I was baptized into the church of Jesus Christ. Throughout my childhood, I was taught and trained to know myself as a disciple of Jesus, a Christian, a believer in him and his gospel, a member not merely of an organization but of a community of faith that extended worldwide, across borders, oceans, and even generations living, dead, and yet to come. Throughout my adult life and ministry, I have been challenged to rethink and renew my commitment regularly. Faith is never a done deal. Salvation is not a contract signed and sealed but an ever ongoing relationship. But I have never been challenged to carry on in faith without any promise or hope. May I never be so challenged, and yet the story of Ruth reminds me that I am and must be in this struggle for as long as I live. Ruth does challenge me to be more than a Christian of convenience and comfort. I believe that through her story, the Spirit of God challenges us to be more than churches of convenience and comfort.

Back to Jesus' two-fold commandment to love God and my neighbor, including all the world's people and groups of people, I ask, *How are we to make it real* – this two-fold love which, thankfully, implies a healthful self-love as well? How can I love my neighbor as myself, if I hate myself? That question relates back to the matter of shame.

There are many ways to make love real, some of them quite pleasant if not always easy. I suggest this morning that, as justice becomes most real when focused upon injustices suffered by others, so also love of the kind Jesus lived, died, and commands for us becomes most real when focused upon the unlove suffered by others, especially the most vulnerable. Who are they, the most vulnerable? Biblically, as our call to worship reminds us, the most vulnerable are represented by the widow (like Ruth), the orphan (like Ruth who leaves her family behind), and the stranger (like Ruth who is identified as one of the disgusting Moabites). The word translated "stranger" identifies the foreigner living among another people, the alien worker, the immigrant who is always vulnerable to mistreatment and exploitation. Those biblical three (the stranger, widow, and orphan) do not exhaust the list but represent everyone put at a severe disadvantage in life, everyone subjected to resentment or just indifference. Jesus, by command, by his life and suffering and death, by his gift of grace beyond description, challenges us to make his love real in our own choices and actions, especially at the points of unlove where other people suffer.

I feel Jesus' challenge as unlove rages all around us and perhaps within us, and so I invite you feel his challenge, also. Amen.