

EXPRESSING LOVE

Ruth 1:11-18; 2:1-3, 11-12

Years ago, some programming on television attempted to reinforce good character traits and to teach beneficial life lessons. With the recent death of Andy Griffith we were reminded of the many good moral lessons that were communicated in each episode of that series. I can remember the series “Father Knows Best” that was on in the late 1950's and there is one particular episode that made a lasting impression on me. The thesis of that episode was that someone had made a claim that everything we do can be traced back to a basically selfish motivation. In other words, no one ever operates with pure altruism. That episode was essentially a debate between the father of the family (who was arguing against this cynicism) and the person who proposed the idea. The cynic’s view was that even if you give someone a gift, then you are going to benefit from an improved relationship with that person and, therefore, the motive is basically selfish.

If we wanted to put this argument in a philosophical or perhaps theological framework, then we might say that no one is capable of showing truly selfless or agape love. If a person were to make a donation of money or materials to a good cause, then someone might argue that he will benefit from the admiration of others or the good public image that comes from such a donation. If the gift were to be given anonymously, then it might be argued that it was done so that the person might feel good about himself or that he was attempting to buy favor from God. What do you think? Is it possible to operate in such a way that all taint of selfishness is absent in what motivates us to act? In other words how can we express love to others from pure motives?

The story of Ruth in the Old Testament is an example of how people might express unselfish love to each other. As we have often seen, it is in the crises of life that a person’s true character is usually revealed.

In a sense, life is rather routine except for the crises that come along. Crises are the disruptions of the “routine” and these disruptions can be judged to be good and bad. The birth of a baby and a job promotion are usually considered to be good crises and an earthquake or car wreck would be bad crisis. So much of what stands out in our memories of what makes up our history is a series of good and bad crises. A lot of the history of Israel is related to crises. Some of the infrequent crises that we read about were related to famines or severe food shortages. In sub-Saharan Africa, there are such food shortages in our recent history. Whole groups of people move from one area to another area so they can find food.

Such a crisis occurred during the time of the Judges in Israel and the events related to this situation make up the introduction to the Book of Ruth. The story is familiar to many of us of how the family of Elimelech and Naomi along with their two sons left Bethlehem to find food in the land of Moab. It turned out that Elimelech died and the two sons married young Moabite women. Then the two sons died and all that was left of this family was Naomi and her two daughters-in-law. Now those events were a whole series of crises: famine, family relocation, death of the father, marriage of sons, death of sons, and three surviving widows.

Sacrificial Expression of Love – 1:11-13

¹¹ But Naomi said, “Return, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Have I yet sons in my womb, that they may be your husbands? ¹²“Return, my daughters! Go, for I am too old to have a husband. If I said I have hope, if I should even have a husband tonight and also bear sons, ¹³ would you therefore wait until they were grown? Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters; for it is harder for me than for you, for the hand of the LORD has gone forth against me.” Ruth 1:11-13 (NASB95)

Why would three surviving widows be a crisis situation? We hear so much today about women's rights. There is no reason women should not have the same standing under the law and in the work place as men and in most situations this is true. However, this has not always been the case. It wasn't too many years ago that women did not have the right to vote in this "land of the free and home of the brave." In the time of the judges in the Middle East (and in most of the Middle East today) women's rights were almost nonexistent. Naomi was fortunate to have had two sons on which she could depend. Apparently, this family was making the best of a bad situation as they tried to lead normal lives as displaced citizen in the land of Moab. The sons married women of Moab which was not an ideal situation because in doing so they were not maintaining purity in race and religion which was very important to the Israelites. Nevertheless, they were going about life as if they were not going to return to Israel. They lived there about ten years before both the young men died.

Without a man in the family, Naomi began to check out other options for herself and the two younger women. Generally, in that society, men conducted the business and women were at a definite disadvantage. One of Naomi's options was to go back to Israel where she might find relatives who could act on her behalf. Naomi felt some responsibility for her two daughters-in-law. In that culture, the main family ties were with the husband's side of the family. Young women who married were more closely associated to their in-laws than to their own mother and father. This explains why when Naomi left for Israel the two younger women prepared to go with her. Before they had gone very far, Naomi realized that the younger women might have a better chance if they returned to their parents' home and she insisted that they go. She wanted them to go back, find husbands, have children and be happy. They were likely still quite young, probably less than thirty. Both Orpah and Ruth had grown to love Naomi and they did not want to leave. Finally, she convinced Orpah to return but Ruth would not be convinced.

Declaration of Commitment – 1:14-18

¹⁴ And they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ Then she said, "Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to leave you *or* turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people *shall be* my people, and your God, my God. ¹⁷ "Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may the LORD do to me, and worse, if *anything but* death parts you and me." ¹⁸ When she saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. Ruth 1:14-18 (NASB95)

This passage is one of the most beautiful expressions of devotion of one person toward another that has ever been written. It is quite possible to be associated with a person over a period of years and experience feelings of love and care for that person that are deeper than you felt toward your parents. Ruth felt that way toward Naomi. Here we see a relationship transcending nationalism. Ruth was not concerned that she would have to move from her native land to the land of Israel. She said, "Whither thou goest, I will go." We see a relationship that transcends all previous friendships and relations. She said, "Your people will be my people." This is even a relationship that transcended religious affiliation. Ruth said, "Your God will be my God." The witness of Naomi's life must have been terrifically positive. We could assume that Ruth saw qualities in Naomi that would cause her to abandon her country, her former friends and relatives, and even the idols she was taught to worship.

Crisis situations usually lead to having to make difficult choices. Elimelech had to make such choices to leave Israel to find food for his family. Naomi made a courageous choice in going back to her homeland. This was followed by an equally difficult choice of Ruth to not go back to her parents' family but to become part of the family of her mother-in-law. All of us

should hope that our lives could have such influence on others that they would choose to accept Jesus, to be a part of the kingdom of God and to associate themselves with God's people.

Demonstration of Commitment – 2:1-3

¹ Now Naomi had a kinsman of her husband, a man of great wealth, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. ² And Ruth the Moabitess said to Naomi, “Please let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain after one in whose sight I may find favor.” And she said to her, “Go, my daughter.” ³ So she departed and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Ruth 2:1-3 (NASB95)

Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem in the land of Judah and went about trying to survive in a society that had made some provision for widows and the disadvantaged. There is no mention of what the situation was for widows in the land of Moab. If there were any provisions, they were likely related to taking care of relatives and Naomi had no relatives in that area. Even Israel's provision for assisting disadvantaged person was typically taken on by relatives. There was some semblance of a community effort in place during this time in Israel. The provision of “gleaning” was to allow those who did not have the means of growing their own food to find enough to get by.

Most of what we recognize as charitable efforts for the needy have developed over the past two hundred years when Christians started to take seriously the teaching of the scriptures about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and healing the sick as part of the evangelism efforts that grew out of the renewed emphasis to make the Great Commission a reality. It is generally recognized that non-Christian religions have fewer charitable efforts than what we take for granted as what we should be doing.

It was humiliating for people to be unable to support themselves and to have to depend on charity. God's law that required farmers to leave the corners of the field for the gleaners provided a means of self-help that would allow a person in need to do some work to get food to support themselves and their family. We also find that there was a blessing associated with obedience for the farmer. In Deuteronomy 24:19 we see a promise that God would bless them in all the work of their hands for showing kindness to those in need.

Ruth took advantage of this situation when she went to follow the harvesters in the fields so she and her mother-in-law could survive. In God's provision she picked a field belonging to a relative of Naomi, a man named Boaz.

Rewards of Commitment – 2:11-12

¹¹ Boaz replied to her, “All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. ¹² “May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge.” Ruth 2:11-12 (NASB95)

As the story unfolded, Boaz noticed the young woman gleaning in the field and discovered that she was a relative by marriage. He was apparently attracted to her. He had heard of her kindness to Naomi and invited her to return to his field each day during the harvest. He even made some arrangements to have the harvesters leave some extra for her to glean.

Sometimes we wonder if “doing the right thing” toward another person is recognized by others. Admittedly, having others recognize what we do should not be the motivation for showing love to others; however, the thought might cross our minds. My guess is that both Naomi and Ruth were focused so much on survival that other people's opinions were not high on their list of concerns.

In verse twelve we find what I will term the “Blessing of Boaz.” When we do something

that is unselfish, we can depend on God to recognize our motives and to reward what we do. In this blessing we find two benefits: recompense or repayment for deeds done and full wages that would be paid from God. The implied conditional part of the blessing is that these benefits are for those who find their refuge or place of safety under the overshadowing protection of Jehovah.

The word translated as “recompense” (in the KJV) is very similar to “shalom” or the Hebrew word for peace which also carries the idea of general well being and is spoken as a greeting as well as an implied blessing. The Hawaiian word “aloha” is used in a similar way. I guess that most of us think that if we are putting our trust in God and if we are doing what we should be doing in helping those in need, then we have an expectation that God will cause us to experience well being. We know that is not always the case and people do experience problems.

The second part of the blessing regarding “full wages” has an implication of something more specific or concrete as compared to the more general or abstract idea of “general well being.” The Hebrew word translated as “full” is also closely associated with the word shalom which would carry the idea of being complete, safe, appropriate, and peaceable. The word “wages” implies an object of value that a person can use such as money or material possessions. Putting all this together, we get the idea that the Blessing of Boaz is that those who trust in the Lord and do what is right should experience a condition of well being and also have some material blessing that are beneficial to them. This could be contrasted with those who received material possessions for which they did not work and these possession cause problems in their lives. We have heard stories of people who “won the lottery” and the sudden influx of wealth resulted in more harm than good for them and their families.

Naomi was delighted when she learned of the meeting and recognized that since Boaz was a relative he might see some additional responsibility toward Ruth. Indeed, Naomi coached Ruth in the way she should approach Boaz to indicate her interest in him. As you know the story, the outcome was perfect. Boaz wanted to marry Ruth and the arrangements were made with another relative who might have chosen to marry Ruth instead. This older man was fearful that such a marriage would endanger his estate and declined. The way was opened for Boaz and Ruth to marry.