

“Words of Jesus: The Sacrifice of ‘Shema”

Ruth 1:16-18; Mark 12:28-34

Chan Willis – F.P.C.-L.C./Welsh
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Now, as you look at today’s sermon title, “The Sacrifice of ‘Shema,’ you may be wondering just what the heck ‘Shema’ is. “Shema” is the Hebrew word for “Hear.” Which is the first word you ‘heard’ Jesus say when he was asked what the first, most important commandment was: **“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord, is one.”** This statement, and the words to follow, come from *Deuteronomy 6:4*, and is perhaps THE foundational statement of faith in the Jewish tradition. The first ‘creed,’ if you will, for ‘God-followers’; the O.T. version of *John 3:16*, or “The Apostles Creed.” By virtue of it being known simply by the word that means ‘to hear,’ clearly these are words God wants his faithful to LISTEN to!

The “Shema” goes on to declare what I am sure most of you Christians here are fairly familiar with... words that have also become for US a fundamental ‘statement of faith’: **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ... AND ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’** (*Mark 12:29-31*) In the ‘Top 40’ list of all-time ‘hits’ from God’s Word, this would clearly rank up there at or near the top. But what about our passage from Ruth? How many of you were familiar with THIS one? If not, that’s OK. We won’t ‘revoke’ your ‘Christian membership card.’ These 4 chapters of Ruth do make it one of the shorter, and more obscure books in the Bible.

For ‘my own self,’ I have a very personal reason to remember this passage. It was read in the wedding for Barrie and me some 40+ years ago. You yourself may associate it with ‘maawage’ ceremonies. But the reason I remember it so well is because of the pre-marital discussion we had with one of the officiants for the service, Rev. John Callaway. Pastor John wanted us to understand that while it is a beautiful expression of LOVE and DEVOTION, these are not words being exchanged between a starry-eyed bride and groom; but rather, by a daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law. (And, more accurately, EX-in-laws due to the death of the husband/son!) So, in one way, these words might be considered to relate more to a ‘funeral’ instead of a ‘wedding!’

Ruth’s words to Naomi, however, are MUCH more than about the connection they may have shared through marriage vows. But rather, the love and commitment that they shared through their faith in GOD. By her dedication to one for whom she had no ‘legal obligation’

anymore, Ruth was showing her faith in a real, tangible way. Which makes this a great companion verse to the passage from Mark. One which also expresses how we are to show our *shared faith in God* in a 'real, tangible way.' That we honor God not simply by our fulfillment of 'legal obligations'... by our 'obedience to the Laws' of God... but by the way we demonstrate **love** and **commitment** to our Lord and His people. From the ancient words of the "Shema" to the later actions of a woman for her mother-in-law, we must HEAR what our One True God has to say about how to live out our life of faith... by our level of **devotion** to **God**, and to our '**neighbors**'...

First, let us consider how **Ruth** lived out her **devotion** to God and God's human creation. Ruth demonstrated that her commitment to Naomi was much more than through a '**legal contract**'... but rather, through a '**love covenant**.' Naomi, who had lost both her husband and two sons to untimely deaths, was going to return to her hometown of Bethlehem (hmmm... that town sounds familiar... 😊) Which is not the *only* 'Christ connection.' Further, Ruth and future husband Boaz would have a son who would be the grandfather to King David... a descendant of JESUS. Soooo, this little book is actually an integral part of the big picture of our faith history. Like you and me! As believers all of our lives are intertwined!)

ANYWAY, Naomi told her two daughters-in-laws to stay back in their homeland of Moab with their families... but Ruth declared that she would have none of that! 'Don't tell me to leave you. I am with you. Your people... my people. Your God... my God. Where you die... will also be my final resting place. That whole 'until death do us part' thing wasn't just for your son and me. It relates to us as well. And may 'OUR' God punish me severely for ever abandoning you.'

And what makes this even more remarkable about this bond that she wants to honor with this Jewish woman, is that Ruth was born a Gentile. A non-believer in the "One true God of Israel." In fact, she was a member of a group highly disdained by Jews, the Moabites. But in no small part because of the faith of Naomi, she became a zealous convert to Judaism. Because she witnessed the love of God embodied in this woman of faith, she herself came to believe in that same God. We should further note that Ruth said she should incur God's wrath "***if even Death separates me from you.***" Because of their common faith in God, they would remain together in heaven, not separated by physical death. Because of the devotion that one person lived out in

her own life, despite great personal losses, another person from a very different background was 'inspired' to embrace that same faith...

In the experience from Mark's Gospel, we also have someone who would demonstrate their **devotion** to God... but in quite a different scenario. Not a >> Gentile convert, but a **'teacher,'** a **'scribe.'** He was a member of a learned class in Jewish society who studied Scripture and meticulously copied manuscripts by hand. One who was quite 'well-versed' ... literally... in the teaching of the Jewish faith. And because of that background, this man could have well been a little skeptical of this other 'Teacher.' This 'N.C.O.T.B.'... this 'New Christian on the Block.'

BUT he could tell that there was something special about this 'Nazarene.' As verse 28 said, **"Seeing that he answered them well,"** this respected religious authority conducted a little 'test.' He asked Jesus what was the first, most important of God's commands. And rather than quote one of the original 10 commandments, Jesus puts a new twist on his response. He quotes two foundational Scriptures from the Torah, from *Deuteronomy* and *Leviticus*, combining them into one. Summarizing all 10 Laws into a beautifully balanced statement of faith: **Love God. Love one another.** 5 words. [Hold up 5 fingers] Old Testament meet New Testament. "The old has been made new." And, in HEARING Jesus' response, and being receptive to His teaching, this learned man of God had his own faith 'renewed'... because he was open to these new teachings of a historic faith. That the outward, physical ways in which we practice our faith... the 'sacrifices' that we make... cannot take the place of how we 'hear' God speak to our hearts in the 'here and now'... speaking in love for Him and one another.

So, how do you and I live out **our own devotion** to God and each other? We can learn from both Ruth and the Scribe. Ruth, a non-believer, came to faith through the example of one who had suffered great loss and yet remained faithful. And yet, in her own ways, Ruth too was an encouragement and inspiration to her mentor. The student became the teacher. Just as we, who know the importance of standing by the side of our friends and family, learned from the One who says to us, **"I will never leave you nor forsake you."** Jesus... from whom even death cannot separate us...

We also can learn from that human teacher who was himself always learning. One who asked questions, and listened for the answer. Always open to gleaning new insights from eternal

truths. That to love God with all one's heart, soul, mind and strength... and to love one another... will lead us to display our faith in rich and beautiful ways. NOT the other way around. Our good works do not lead to belief... our belief should lead to good works. The fruit doesn't bear the tree... the tree bears the fruit...

I would challenge us ALL to consider how our lives are 'bearing the fruit' of the 'tree of life,' Jesus Christ. **How does your life bear witness to your commitment to 'love God' and 'love one another?'** That testimony to your faith begins right here, in this community of faith. People who come in these doors need to see smiling faces and happy hearts, who demonstrate the love of God that is within them. Worshipers need to celebrate the gifts of prayer and speech and singing and proclamation of the Word that fellow believers possess, and are willing to step out in faith to use. Weary leaders who have shouldered the burdens of forging this new way in the wilderness for *years* need others with gifts for spiritual leadership and wisdom in managing day-to-day administration of the church to come alongside them to share in those responsibilities.

Opportunities to serve INSIDE these walls goes hand-in-hand with service OUTSIDE these walls. How are we meeting the NEEDS... how are we meeting the PEOPLE... that lay right on the other side of our front doors? Like a football team, we come in here to 'study playbooks' and 'practice'... but out there, it is GAME TIME! Where we must 'practice' what we 'preach!' Be it a parking lot in Lake Charles for Trunk r' Treat, or a school classroom/cafeteria in Welsh, people need to know that what 'team' we are on: "Team Jesus." In the words of that Scribe, "**besides him there is no other.**" In this high-tech world we need to re-engage the 'old-school' practices of **communication**. Of **compassion**. Of **commitment**. We need to learn from 'newbies' in the faith like Ruth, who in no-uncertain-terms made it clear to Naomi, 'Where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people. Your God is my God.' Who do you know in your life today who needs that type of encouragement... that kind of **devotion?**

Both Ruth and that nameless teacher demonstrated their loyalty to the one that they loved. And in so doing, they both attested to the truth of Jesus' words: "**You are not far from the kingdom of God.**" The question that you & I must ask ourselves is, '**How far am I?'** And then, to pause to 'Shema'... to '**hear**'... the answer...

CHARGE: Today we have considered words like 'Shema' and 'Sacrifice.'
That the 'sacrifices' we make are not done to lead TO our faith in, and love of God, But rather, they come OUT of that faith and love of God.
As we remember that Hebrew word that means 'to HEAR,' may we also consider that sometimes the greatest 'sacrifice' that we can make is to 'HEAR'... to 'hear' God, and to 'hear' one another. As your go forth to do a better job of 'hearing' both God and man, know that you do NOT go alone...