

“MOST LIKELY TO . . . II- PUT OTHERS FIRST”

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Mother’s Day
Festival of the Christian Home

Ruth 1:1-8

Luke 10:38-42

Since today is Mother’s Day, I thought I would start with a few “mother” stories. One Mother’s Day, two little boys, about six and ten years old, handed their mother a potted plant and handmade cards. She was thrilled, of course, but they seemed a little downtrodden. When she asked them what was the matter, the older one replied that when their dad had taken them to the flower shop, they had seen other flowers that they really wanted to give her, but couldn’t afford. They were a bunch of beautiful flowers that had a ribbon on them, that said “RIP.” He said, “Dad told us that meant ‘Rest in Peace,’ and since you’re always saying all you want is a little peace so you can rest . . . “

The next story is about a little girl who was in the Christmas play at church. She proudly stood up on the stage with all of the other cast members, nervously waiting for the moment she was to deliver her one line. Well, the time came, and she froze. Her mind went blank, and she had no idea what the line was. Luckily, her mother was sitting in the front row, and so she mouthed the words to her daughter that she was to say – “I am the light of the world.” Alas, it didn’t work. Her daughter apparently couldn’t read her lips. So she tried mouthing them again. Nothing, and now the girl was panicking. So finally, the mother, in a loud stage whisper, said to the girl, “I am the light of the world.” Beaming, the girl took center stage and loudly proclaimed her one line, “My mother is the light of the world!” (How great is that?!)

One last story. A teacher in elementary school was trying to get her class to learn fractions, so she turned to a child and posed a situation. “Suppose,” she said, “that your family included your two parents and five children, and your mother baked your favorite, an apple pie for dessert. What fraction of the pie would you get?” Without batting an eye, he replied, “One sixth!” “No,” she corrected him, “I think you should have said one seventh!” “Oh no,” chimed back the child. “My mom would say she didn’t want any.”

Now, the reason I saved that story for last is because of the theme of today’s sermon, and it is, as you know, “putting others first,” which most mothers do

extremely well, like the mother who would tell her family she didn't want pie, when she knew that would mean more for each of them.

Today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures is perhaps the quintessential story of someone putting others first. It's the story of Ruth. Some of you know her story well, but others don't, so let me share it with you, because it is an amazing story.

Ruth was from Moab. At the time a famine struck the country of Judah, a family from Judah whose father was Elimelech and mother Naomi, decided to leave in order to find food for their family. They left and ended up in Moab. Elimelech and Naomi had two sons – Mahlon and Chilion.

For a while, everything was good for this family in their new home. But then, disaster struck. The family patriarch, Elimelech died, and Naomi was a widow. But she had her sons to watch over her.

She watched as eventually her sons fell in love and married Moabite women – Mahlon married Ruth and Chilion married Orpah. Again, then, for a while, everything was good.

But then, more disaster. Both men died. Both of Naomi's sons. Now, she was plunged into deep grief, because she felt totally on her own. You know, in that day and age, there were rules for how widows were to be cared for – first, by their sons, and then by other male relatives – but now, there was nobody. No males to care for her.

As it happens, after a while, Naomi learns that the famine has passed in Judah, so she decides to return to her homeland. She is still deeply grieving and feeling alone, and she turns to both of her daughters-in-law, in whose land they were living, and basically says, "I'm leaving, but you stay here in your homeland with your families who love you."

Orpah, Chilion's wife, decides to do just that. But not Ruth. Ruth decides to go with Naomi. Naomi tries to get her to change her mind. She tries to get her to stay in Moab, her home, and not come to Judah, where she'll be considered a foreigner. It will be hard for her in Moab – she, then, will be on her own.

But in one of the most beautiful verses in all of scripture, Ruth binds herself to her mother-in-law saying, "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried; the Lord do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me." (I just had to read that from the King James Version. It's so beautiful.)

We dare not underestimate how much that decision cost Ruth. She would truly be an outsider, a foreigner in the land to which they were returning. She had no guarantee that she wouldn't be alone for life, struggling all the way. All she had was her love for her mother-in-law, and her commitment to care for her in the best way possible. Indeed, Ruth is the poster child for the person "most likely to put others first."

All of us know people like Ruth. For some, blessedly, it is our mothers. But no matter who it is, the fact is, that people who put others first, generally do that because they have been loved like that themselves by others, but first and foremost, by God. They love as they have been loved.

The story of God's love for us is that God has always put us first. God gave us the perfection of creation, God gives us grace, second, third, fourth chances, God gives us meaningful lives and relationships, God gives us everything we need. And yes, God's love, like Ruth's, was sacrificial, when he gave his only Son that we might have life and life in abundance.

Love that puts others first is a beautiful reflection of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

You know, I can't tell you the number of times I've sat down with families to plan a loved one's funeral, and I hear them say that he/she always put others first, they would do anything for anybody. I've heard that said about a lot of mothers, in particular.

But you know what? Sometimes, they'll continue on with these words – "at her own expense." They say it kind of sadly, regretting that their loved one had sacrificed so much, when she could have had more.

Which brings me to the other side of "putting others first," which we can explore through today's Gospel lesson. Another familiar Biblical story. Mary and Martha, as you recall, are the sisters of Lazarus. The three of them are dear friends with Jesus, the kind of friends with him where he drops over for dinner.

Well, this lesson is such a time. Jesus has come for dinner, and Martha will do nothing less than prepare the best for him. For sure, she's putting others first – especially Jesus. She's working herself silly in the kitchen, to make sure everything's just right. Along the way, however, she realizes that her sister Mary is nowhere to be seen. She's not slaving alongside her over the hot stove, or setting the table, or hauling water in from outside, or stoking the fire. She's nowhere to be seen.

So Martha takes a peek into the living room, and lo and behold, there's Mary, sitting down by Jesus' feet, just listening to him. Sitting down, doing nothing – in Martha's eyes!

Now, remember Martha had no trouble putting Jesus first when it came to her dedication to this meal. But Mary sitting around doing nothing raises her hackles, and she begins to resent the burden that is on her.

You see, friends, that's the reverse side of always putting others first. You can start being resentful. No one's paying attention to my sacrifice. No one understands what I'm giving up. You know, maybe that mother of that elementary school child, really wanted a piece of that delicious apple pie!

Always putting others first exacts a price on the giver, and I've got news for you – it's not what God asks us to do – solely! Sure, God invites us to put others first, but let me remind you of some famous words of Jesus – “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Oh, we always get the message to love our neighbor, but sometimes we have trouble loving ourselves.

Jesus' response to Martha shows that. He encourages Martha to love herself, when he says that what Mary is doing is okay, she's taking time for herself, she's spending time with the Lord.

I would imagine that all of us know people who always put others first, and never put themselves first. That might even be you. Friends, that's not the life to which God calls us. What God calls us to is a life of balance – loving others **and** loving ourselves.

Jesus modeled that for us so well. Surely he put others first and loved and cared for them everyday of his life. But he also was very good at caring for himself. He spent time with family and friends. He allowed, even encouraged, others to help him. And he regularly went aside by himself to rest, relax and rejuvenate. He modeled a life of balance for us all.

Unless you were living under a rock this week, you know that a royal baby was born in England the other day. Though I can't say I'm keen on his name – Archie – nonetheless, he is a precious baby born to adoring parents. He, and they, got a lot of press this week, and included among it was remembrances of his late grandmother, Princess Diana.

You know, I think, though Diana had her struggles, she did some things right, and one of them, was parenting. She seems to have been able to teach her sons about living a balanced life. They could have stayed in their literal ivory towers and not experienced real life, but instead she took them out and showed

them what it meant to “put others first.” She took them to rescue missions and AIDS hospital rooms. She had them volunteer beside her in all sorts of settings. She showed them with her life, her words, her example, what it means to put others first.

But she also showed them how to care for themselves as well. Who will forget watching them at Disney World, or walking into a supermarket, just like everybody else, to buy something? Who will forget pictures of them skiing with each other with huge smiles on their faces? She taught them well a balanced life, which they seem to have carried now into adulthood, and which, hopefully, they will pass on to their families.

Friends, God has given each of us the gift of life. Surely, the greatest thing we can do with our lives is love – love others, and yes, love ourselves.

On this Mother’s Day, this Festival of the Christian Home, may we renew our commitment to love even more fully – others and ourselves. May it be so.

Amen.