



The Trinity Pulpit



Selflessness

Ruth 1—2:18

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As we continue to explore our church's theme of the Power of ONE this year, we have been reminded that the power of one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one hope and one God and Father of all, who is over all and through and in all is centered around relationships. Our Creator made us to be in relationship with God and with one another. We are reminded of our purpose through the Great Commandment to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love each other in the same way. Our very existence is centered around being relational.

God created us to be relational. Without it, it has been proven that even our physical health suffers.

Leonard Syme, a professor of epidemiology at the University of California at Berkeley, indicates the importance of social ties and social support systems in relationship to mortality and disease rates. He points to Japan as being number one in the world with respect to health and then discusses the close social, cultural, and traditional ties in that country as the reason. He believes that the more social ties, the better the health and the lower the death rate. Conversely, he indicates that the more isolated the person, the poorer the health and the higher the death rate. Social ties are good preventative medicine for physical problems and for mental-emotional-behavior problems.¹

So look at the people around you – they not only increase the days of your life but also enhance the quality of it!

The Top Ten Commandments of Human Relations is something that has been widely circulated by people throughout the generations. Funny thing is, these have not changed over the years.

1. Speak to people. There is nothing as nice as a cheerful word of greeting.
2. Smile at people. It takes seventy-two muscles to frown, only fourteen to smile.
3. Call people by name. Music to anyone's ears is the sound of his/her own name.
4. Be friendly and helpful.
5. Be cordial. Speak and act as if everything you do is genuinely a pleasure, and if it isn't, learn to make it so.
6. Be genuinely interested in people. You can like almost everybody if you try.
7. Be generous with praise, cautious with criticism.
8. Be considerate with the feelings of others. There are usually three sides to a controversy: yours, the other fellow's, and the right one.
9. Be alert to serve. What counts most in life is what we do for others.
10. Add to this a good sense of humor, a big dose of patience, and a dash of humility, and you will be rewarded richly through life.

Let's face it. Human relationships are just difficult. No matter how much we like or even love a person, building a strong relationship that is based on great communication and self-sacrifice takes years to develop. For most of our lives, relationships stay on a



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surface level and never go much deeper. Take, for example, the phenomena of Facebook, an online social network. Though it is a great tool to keep up with people you know on the surface, it is not a place where deep relationships are developed.

However, in the book of Ruth, we find a beautiful story of successful relationships. It is a poignant story of love, loyalty and care for one another in relationship. It is a reminder of our relationship with God, his sovereignty and his grace. It is a reminder of the deep dynamics of personal experience and inter-human dependence. Most of all, it is a powerful reminder of true Christian relationships based on selflessness and putting the needs of others before your own. Through our examination of the first two chapters of Ruth, I hope to encourage each of us to examine our own relationships and find ways to be more selfless for the sake of others.

In this particular time of the Judges, the story begins by letting the readers know that there was a great famine in Bethlehem in Judah. Moab, a neighboring country, did not face the same hardship. Literally, the grass was much greener across the boarder. Therefore, Elimelech and Naomi took their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, to Moab in pursuit of a better life. Surely this was not an easy move for an Israelite family to pick up and relocate to a country that boasted polytheism. Its chief god, Chemosh, required human sacrifices to keep his wrath from coming down upon the Moabites. It was not Bethlehem, to be sure. Soon after settling in Moab, tragedy strikes the family and Elimelech passes, leaving Naomi with just her two sons. Mahlon and Kilion each ended up marrying Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. This was not ideal since their faiths were so different. Sadly, in just a short span of 10 years, tragedy strikes again as both Mahlon and Kilion dies. Having lost her husband and both of her sons, Naomi had nothing left to keep her in Moab. Naomi wanted to go back home to a familiar place.

By definition, to be selfless means putting the needs of others before our own. The next scene in our story is a beautiful example of being selfless. In those times, it was tradition for a widow to remarry the nearest kinsman. However, without a close kinsman, the possibility for remarriage and a better life for Orpah and Ruth were slim to none. Naomi knew that the best chance for her two daughters-in-

law was to stay in Moab and marry other men who would provide for their needs. Therefore, though she really needed Orpah and Ruth for her own survival, Naomi pleaded with the two women to stay in Moab and allow her to return to her homeland. After much grieving, Orpah decided to follow Naomi's advice. However, Ruth would not give up on Naomi. Ruth made an impassioned plea, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me." Ruth had come to believe in Naomi's God, YHWH. Ruth was willing to leave everything behind and start a new life in a new land. When it would have been easy to look out for number one, Ruth refused to leave Naomi to fend for herself. Ruth put the needs of Naomi before her own. What a beautiful picture of being selfless!

When we put the needs of others before our own, we exemplify the grace and self-sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ. Our selfless acts scream loudly the love of God without even speaking a word. As St. Francis of Assisi so wisely said, "Preach the Gospel always, if necessary use words." Our selfless acts of putting other's needs before our own will preach the Gospel!

In order to be selfless, not only do we need to put the needs of others first, but we must also learn to have humility. When Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem, it caused a stir in the whole town. Townspeople began to gather together to gossip about the plight of Naomi and the consequent curse that was sure to be upon her. Surely, if she was a true servant of God, why would God take away her husband and her two sons? What has she done in her life to be so cursed? Can you hear the gossip flying around among the people? Even Naomi figured that she was afflicted and wanted to be called by a different name.

In the midst of all of the rumors and gossip, Ruth remained loyal to her mother-in-law and did whatever was necessary to help provide for their physical needs. She asked Naomi for permission to go out and glean from nearby fields in order to have food for the two of them. Gleaning in the fields meant going behind the harvesters and picking up

anything that was dropped onto the ground or picking through the leftovers of what was deemed unworthy to be harvested. Gleaning in the fields in that time was equivalent to digging through the dumpsters behind a grocery store in order to find out-of-date food that was thrown away in today's world. It was not a glamorous job by any means. On top of all that, a female gleaner was always at risk of physical attacks by evil land-owners or servants who would prey on the weak. In spite of all that was against her, Ruth worked diligently without taking breaks to gather as much grain as possible. She showed incredible humility by being willing to do what many others would not do. No job was beneath her. She was willing to do whatever it took to provide for Naomi and for herself.

In the same way Ruth showed humility by being willing to glean from the nearby fields, the act of washing another person's feet is both a humbling and a spiritual experience. When that person is homeless, the act takes on even greater significance. It tells the person whose feet are being bathed that they have worth, and that someone cares about them enough to touch them in a loving manner.

Each Easter, the physicians, nurses and volunteers of the Los Angeles Mission Community Clinic reach out to the homeless community in this special way. On Good Friday more than 200 homeless men, women and children are given this special treat, as part of an annual Easter celebration at the Los Angeles Mission.

Herb Smith, president of the Los Angeles Mission, said, "We wash the feet of the homeless for two reasons. It is a religious act, commemorating the time during the Last Supper when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. He was demonstrating the ultimate act of servanthood. But for us foot washing has another purpose as well. We find that our homeless guests often have foot problems that go undetected, and we can offer examinations

and evaluations, and even do minor procedures that make them more comfortable. We treat people with respect and dignity, and we want them to enjoy the event and to feel a part of a family."²

If we are to be humble, we must learn to treat no one as being of lesser worth than ourselves. We must learn to serve one another without pride and self-promotion. Consistent humility is almost impossible to achieve but nonetheless worth striving for as we learn to be selfless.

Finally, being selfless is to be generous. When Boaz, a kinsman of Ruth's father-in-law, heard the full story of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and her incredible show of humility in the field, he was moved with compassion. He was moved by the self sacrifice of Ruth for the sake of Naomi. Boaz was moved by Ruth's willingness to glean in the fields and her selfless acts would not go unnoticed. Boaz asked Ruth to stay in his field and to not glean anywhere else. He made provisions for Ruth to not only glean from his fields but to also have sustenance as needed. Boaz instructed his servants to not harm Ruth in any way and to even make gleaning easier by purposely leaving some stalks

for her to harvest rather than having her pick from what fell to the ground. Boaz went above and beyond to help Ruth and Naomi.

Boaz did not have to do what he did. Boaz was more than generous in providing for Ruth and Naomi. He was selfless and it resulted in generosity, because he realized that life isn't about obtaining more and hoarding it for himself. When we are selfless, we understand that our wealth, at whatever level, results in a Christian responsibility of helping others that are in need. No matter our financial status, we can always find someone who needs our generosity. On Super Bowl Sunday, our church family showed incredible generosity by donating \$2,410 to two local missions that work directly with the homeless of our community, Raleigh Rescue Mission and Wake Interfaith Hospitality Net-



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work, through Souper Bowl of Caring. These funds were hand delivered by some of our students in order to see first hand how the money that was raised will impact those that are in financial crisis.

In 1 Timothy 6:17-19, Paul encourages Timothy to teach generosity among the rich.

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

We are reminded to lay up treasures for the Kingdom of God in order that we may take hold of life that is truly life! We are to be generous with our good deeds and be willing to share what God has blessed us with. Especially in these difficult economic times, it is vital that the Church stand in the gap and make an impact for God's Kingdom.

There were once two young men working their way through Stanford University. Their funds got desperately low, and the idea came to one of them to engage Paderewski for a piano recital and devote the profits to their board and tuition. The great pianist's manager asked for a guarantee of two thousand dollars. The students, undaunted, proceeded to stage the concert. They worked hard, only to find that the concert had raised only sixteen hundred dollars. After the concert, the stu-

dents sought the great artist and told him of their efforts and results. They gave him the entire sixteen hundred dollars, and accompanied it with a promissory note for four hundred dollars, explaining that they would earn the amount at the earliest possible moment and send the money to him. "No," replied Paderewski, "that won't do." Then tearing the note to shreds, he returned the money and said to them: "Now, take out of this sixteen hundred dollars all of your expenses, and keep for each of you 10 percent of the balance for your work, and let me have the rest."

The years rolled by – years of fortune and destiny. Paderewski had become premier of Poland. The devastating war came, and Paderewski was striving with might and main to feed the starving thousands of his beloved Poland. There was only one man in the world who could help Paderewski and his people. Thousands of tons of food began to come into Poland for distribution by the Polish premier.

After the starving people were fed, Paderewski journeyed to Paris to thank Herbert Hoover for the relief sent him. "That's all right, Mr. Paderewski," was Mr. Hoover's reply. "Besides, you don't remember it, but you helped me once when I was a student at college and I was in a hole."³

How are your relationships characterized by others? Do others see selfishness or a spirit of self-sacrifice? Do they see pride or do they recognize your humility? Do others see a person who lays up treasures here on earth or a person who lays up treasures in Heaven by being generous here on earth? May God instill in each of us selflessness for the sake of others and for the sake of the Kingdom! ✿

1 Martin & Diedre Bobgan, *How To Counsel From Scripture* (Moody Press, 1985), p. 18.

2 "Footwashing for the Homeless." *Newsroom: News Releases 2007*. Los Angeles Mission. April 6, 2007 <http://www.losangelesmission.org/newsroom/news2007-3.html>.

3 Edward W. Bok. "Generosity." *Sermon Illustrations*. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/g/generosity.htm>.

