

Feel the Love

Proper 26B: Ruth 1, Mark 12

October 31, 2021

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Monday morning, I pulled a book from its shelf and settled into the sagging rocker I paid \$20 for in a neighbor's driveway last spring. The book was one I hadn't read or thought about in years. But when I started reading, all sorts of feelings and associations and memories returned. Including the winding drive up Mt. Sequoia in Fayetteville to the Methodist bookshop with the tinkling bell on the door, and the left-hand turn I'd take when I stepped inside it toward the shelf where Frederick Buechner's books were always on display.

Mercifully, I think, I'm not in the habit of reporting extensively on my feelings to you from this pulpit. But that's what I'm doing here now. I'll bet there are books or songs or objects or smells that elicit sudden feelings in you, maybe in disarming and surprising ways.

Yes, it was one of Frederick Buechner's books I opened on Monday morning. A memoir of his childhood, *The Sacred Journey*. And Buechner is nothing if not a master of nostalgia, if we can use that word generously. "Nostalgia" comes from the Greek *nostos*, which means to return home and *algos*, which means pain. So, before nostalgia is necessarily saccharine or escapist, it's a kind of homesickness that's felt very much in the present. And Frederick Buechner's conviction, whether he was writing a novel or a sermon or a memoir, was that we all share a kind of homesickness. And even that we can access something holy at the source of our lives, not only through our own memories, but through someone else's if they're truthfully told.

And so it was for me. That wonderful nostalgic ache opened as I read of Missildine's Drugstore, "that smelled of medicine and newspapers and cologne and where they made strong, dark cokes at the soda fountain and grilled cheese sandwiches as heavy and limp as dead birds..." And as I met Buechner's terrifying grandmother again, sitting in her overstuffed chair next to an unlit lamp, listening to Wagner on the Philco. "She knows the libretto by heart," he tells us, "as she also knows by heart how to crochet in the dusk with her silk and scissors lying on the great shelf of her bosom..."

I've never been to Missildines, and aristocratic Grandmother Buechner, in her 12th floor Manhattan apartment, might as well have inhabited another planet than my grandparents, sitting in their matching floral La-Z-Boys in Arkansas, watching The Lawrence Welk Show. But somehow something like love was stirred, if not for these particular people and places, then for this way of sacred remembering.

"Memory is more than a looking back to a time that is no longer;" Buechner wrote, "it is a looking out into another kind of time altogether where everything that ever was continues not just to be, but to grow and change with the life that is in it still."

So maybe there's a way of remembering, even a form of nostalgia, that is not a wishing we were back in another time and place, but the opening of a present experience of love for the world as it is, in all its beauty and brokenness. And maybe there's a love for the things of the world, even by way of memory or nostalgia or that sacred homesickness, that can actually be, not a distraction from, but the way into an expanded love in us for God. Put another way, what if learning to actually feel a form of love for my neighbor, with all his quirks and sins, is how I actually learn to feel a transforming love for God?

It's possible that a loving nostalgia was stirred in a few of you this morning by the song of Ruth, because you remember it being read at your wedding: "Where you go, I will go; Where you

lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried...”

It really is a perfect love poem for a wedding, isn't it? Except for the pesky, overlooked detail that Ruth did not sing it to her soon-to-be lover Boaz. She sang it to Naomi, her mother-in-law. And, whatever your relationship with your mother-in-law happens to have been like, I'm guessing she's not the person you had in mind when you got all misty eyed at those promises once upon a time, or even just now, hearing them all these years later.

Now, here's what a clever preacher might do with a setup like this one. He might explain to you that there are different kinds of love, and say that in our time, we're far too obsessed with the romantic variety. It stirs our useless nostalgias and distracts us from the hard work of love in the present, which involves decisions more than feelings.

He might even talk about how impoverished our English language is, as was ancient Hebrew, having only one word for the varieties of love. The Greeks, he'll tell you, mostly so you'll know he's been to seminary, had no fewer than *six* words for love. And maybe he'll say that thing about how many words for snow the Eskimos have, and you'll nod along thoughtfully, thinking he's made a very good point about the love and the snow and all that.

But for today, at least, I'm not that preacher. Because I don't think Hebrew and English are entirely wrong for using the same word for your love for a husband or a grandmother or a sister or a friend or a grilled cheese sandwich heavy and limp as a dead bird. And before the love of Ruth for Naomi was a choice to follow her into her strange country and even into a life with her strange God, Ruth's love was an affection she could feel. Why else would the story turn to poetry when she told her what she'd decided to do?

I also think Jesus was inviting us into loves that we experience in our very bodies and being, not just responsible decisions we make with our minds.

When Jesus told a scribe that the greatest commandment was to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and that the second was to love your neighbor as you love yourself ... well, first of all, the difference between God and your neighbor is probably bigger than the difference between your girlfriend and a grilled cheese sandwich. But Jesus uses the same word for love of God and love of neighbor. And secondly, if he was talking about a dispassionate decision making process that some automatron told you is what real love is, well why does Jesus say that it requires all of your heart, and all of your soul, and all of your mind, and all of your strength?

Maybe unconditional *agape* love is not precisely the same thing as *eros*. But Jesus talks like it's just as all consuming and that it lives in the very same place. The place where our affections and our fears and our deepest desires live. Which means it lives in the place where the wounds that have made us may still be tender as well. Grief, after all, is a symptom of love, not a sign of its absence. Grief is what love looks like in the face of loss. No one's ever grieved the loss of something they didn't love.

The point being that you can't love like Jesus wants us to love with only your mind. Not God or your neighbor, I'm afraid. This life Jesus calls us to involves every part of us, our deepest set emotions very much included.

The specter of the Rev. Dr. Judith McDaniel, my homiletics professor, is looming right about now, scolding me about preaching on the Gospel and the Old Testament lesson in the same sermon. But I'm sorry. I've got to go with my heart this time and say that I really do believe that there is something importantly connected in all these loves. Ruth's love for Naomi, who asked to be called Mara, because her life had become so bitter with pain and grief, is not unrelated to Ruth's love for Boaz, whom she will make a shrewd move on at the threshing room floor, but will also fall headlong for, as he will for her. Nor is your love for the people and things that you love, even your memories, unrelated to what it means to love God with all of your life.

If we think love of God is a concept we hold in our heads or a responsible moral decision that we make, I just don't think we're in the realm in our lives Jesus is trying to reach. If we've scrubbed the messiness of desire and obsession and longing embedded in actual human relationships from our concept of Christian love, I think Jesus might look over at us and say, "I'm sorry, but you're actually still quite far from the kingdom of God."

But what we see in the stories of scripture, over and over again, is that even our small, imperfect human loves can be openings into larger ones. Doorways through which God can lead us into more expansive ways of loving. Ruth's love for Naomi led her into Jerusalem, and not just to Boaz, but into the lineage of David, which was the lineage of Jesus. And Jesus will say more about loving God and neighbor. He'll expand our concept of neighbor beyond the familiar person next door until it includes Samaritan heretics and outright enemies. In fact, it seems like the path to loving God, whom we cannot see (as 1st John points out), doesn't run *around*, but directly *through* our love for the flawed and complicated humans that populate our own flawed and complicated stories.

A big part of me wants to believe this isn't so. I love the idea that loving someone doesn't require me to like them. I've said that myself. But I just don't believe it anymore. I'm even coming to believe that some aspect of my experience of the lovingkindness of God will be trapped and cut off by my felt contempt for another human being. Some part of me will never open to God until it opens to the person I despise.

This sounds like a heavy burden, if not an outright curse, given my feelings for more than a few of God's children. But for centuries the mystics and contemplatives have told us that this difficult truth is also a way. Across religious traditions, spiritual guides have taught ways of praying that quiet our chattering minds and turn our attention toward feelings we hold in our bodies and our breath. Which means you can start with loves that come easily, maybe even nostalgic memories or romantic crushes. Start with a felt love that comes easy, and from there, you can learn to pray in ways that expand that love outward, just as Jesus taught, through parts of ourselves we find hard to love, to other people, to outright enemies, even to God. We won't finish this work in this life, but movement is possible. And the church really can be a community whose practices and sacraments expand our loves outward a little further each day, each year, to involve, if not all of them, at least a little more of our hearts, our souls, our minds, our strength.

So, here's an assignment. Go find one thing in your life that you love madly this week — a child, a story, a memory, even the creak of your favorite Calvary pew — and let yourself love it with all that you are and all that you have. But don't see that love as the end. See it as a beginning. Don't see it as an arrival, but as the first step on a path that leads through loves that come harder, though loves that may feel impossible right now, but a path, you might even come to believe, whose entire length is held, just as you are, by the limitless lovingkindness of God.