

**24 Pentecost  
November 4, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

When Robert Bowers ... the man accused of killing 11 people at the Temple of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh a week ago ... was taken to Allegheny General Hospital with gunshot wounds, he was treated by doctors and nurses who were Jewish as he shouted "I want to kill all the Jews." Amid the ugliness around us we need to be reminded that the world is filled with decent, moral, upright and ethical people like those doctors and nurses ... people who have no home in their hearts for hate.

I was not feeling well on Friday night so I did not attend the Shabbat services at Temple Bet Yam, but those of you that did may have heard the phrase *tikkum olam*. It is a teaching in Judaism that means to "repair the world." Our world desperately needs repair. Our wounds need healing. We need a world where hate has no home.

This week this divided nation will go to the polls. We are deeply saddened and shaken by the anti-Semitic killings in Pittsburgh. Many in this country are being alienated from each other by the rhetoric around a caravan of immigrants headed to our southern border. The "us" and "them" even hits us here in St. Augustine ... "Hate Has No Home Here" signs are being stolen from people's yards. Is there anything to ground us as we face this Tuesday's elections and beyond? Something more than just "winning" or "losing?" It may seem a stretch, but let's look at today's scriptures.

In our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning we hear the first of two parts of the Ruth saga. This is an incredible story that is an encouragement to all women ... for all times. It amazes me that the story even survived in the Hebrew Scriptures knowing that those who decided what was in and what was out were all men. It is a story of the strength, courage, and cunning of two women in a male dominated society.

As the story begins, there is a famine in the area of Bethlehem, the home of Elimelech and Naomi. So the couple and their two sons left Bethlehem and immigrated to the neighboring country of Moab. A few years later Elimelech died leaving Naomi a widow, but her two sons married Moabite women and so Naomi lived with them and their new wives. One of the wives was named Ruth. Ten years after Elimelech died both of Naomi's sons died ... not only was Naomi a widow, but now so were both her two daughters-in-law. With no family but her daughters-in-laws left in Moab Naomi decided to move back to Bethlehem where she could at least live with her blood relatives. She encouraged her two daughters-in-law to stay in Moab and make new lives for themselves, and one of Naomi's daughters-in-law, Orpah, decided to

stay in Moab. But Ruth chose to go to Bethlehem ... to leave her home country of Moab and be an immigrant in Israel. These are Ruth's moving words to Naomi:

*Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge,  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.*

In next week's reading from Ruth we will hear the rest of the story. A mother and her daughter-in-law, both widows, move back to Bethlehem. Naomi, of course is a native of Bethlehem, but Ruth is an immigrant. Yet they needed the security of a family provider. So the story next week tells us how Ruth manipulates her way into becoming the wife of Boaz, a wealthy landowner. This immigrant woman from Moab ... married to a native Bethlehemite, Boaz ... has a son in Bethlehem. The son's name was Obed, and Obed was the father of Jesse who was the father of David ... shepherd boy David who would become King of Israel. This is the story of how an outsider ... a foreigner ... an immigrant ... becomes the great grandmother of the most renowned character in Hebrew Scripture.

Interestingly, this is another book of the Bible where God is not mentioned at all, yet, at least one of the points of this story is that God obviously was not concerned with whether Ruth was from Israel ... whether Ruth was Jewish ... just whether Ruth was faithful.

But what does it mean to be faithful? In the reading from Mark's gospel we heard an exchange between Jesus and a scribe. The scribe asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" In response Jesus quoted what is known as the *Shema*:

*'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

This is the *Shema*, which is a quote from the Book of Deuteronomy, and it is used as a prayer ... every morning and every evening ... by faithful Jews even today. When the scribe affirms Jesus' response Jesus says to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And the author of Mark's gospel added, "After that no one dared to ask him any question."

However, you might remember that in Luke's gospel, there is an additional question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with the story we call the Good Samaritan. It is a story of an outsider ... a foreigner ... an immigrant ... a non-Jew ... doing the faithful thing of loving his neighbor ... even when he didn't even know him.

As many of you know, I did not grow up in the Episcopal Church. I am the oldest of six children and when I was younger, my parents attended whatever church was socially or geographically convenient. When our next door neighbor was the pastor of a Presbyterian church we went there; when the Methodist church was across the street that is where we attended services; when my father's boss worshipped at a Congregational church we worshipped with him. It

wasn't until I was in college, when my family moved to the coast of North Carolina, that they began attending an Episcopal Church on a regular basis, and it was then that I became a confirmed Episcopalian.

I did not grow up in the Episcopal Church, and Ruth did not grow up in the Jewish faith. Yet, I consider my exposure to these different Christian denominations to be an asset. It taught me about the diversity of ways in which people in different churches worshipped. It also taught me that they were all just different ways of expressing essentially the same faith. In my almost fifty years in the Episcopal Church, over forty of them in the ordained ministry, I have also come to understand that even within our own denomination there is great diversity in its expression, yet a common faith that holds us together. Being married to a Jewish woman has also taught me about the faith in which Jesus lived ... the faith of the *Shema*.

Not surprisingly, faithful people of many expressions all claim to know God's will with remarkable certainty. The problem is they disagree, sometimes vehemently. One of the troubling currents in our time is the tendency of religious people to speak as if they know the mind of God; that their expression of the faith is the "right" one and therefore others must be "wrong." A lot of what is being said in religious circles can suggest that some people claim to have God figured out, under control, in their pockets.

I have a hard time believing that God really cares about these various sects of our religious expression. Obviously it did not matter to God in the case of Ruth ... a Moabite ... an immigrant to Israel ... who did not grow up Jewish. However, God has shown us what it means to be truly faithful. And Jesus, who was Jewish, told us that the first and greatest commandment is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." And then he said, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

There is much in the world today that separates us one from another. Politics is one ... religion is another. Is ours the "right" way to worship? Is our faith the "correct" expression of God's will? Can we know the mind of God? I think not. But we can still see and follow the One God sent to show us the way. I believe that to be a Christian is not to have a list of certainties, but to give our lives ... all of our lives, our hearts, and souls and minds to follow God. And then to love our neighbor as ourselves. We might not always agree, but God help us if we forsake our modesty and civility, our sense of mystery and wonder, our doubts and our loves.

It seems to me that Jesus left the scribe wrestling with a mystery. And oddly enough, the scriptures seem to be telling us, this is part of God's gift to us. In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah God says, "My ways are not your ways, and my thought are not your thoughts." God intentionally chooses to be mysterious, and for our sake. If God were fully and completely revealed ... if we were to see God beyond all mystery ... our freedom would disappear. We would be forced to believe, forced to be obedient. No, this mystery is part of God's blessing.

Certitude is a spiritual danger. If we claim to know God's ways without question, we limit God to the shape of our own minds. As St. Augustine put it 1700 years ago, "If you think you

understand [God], [then] it isn't God." In fact, the Christian faith has never been a package of certainties handed down straight from God. It has acknowledged the mystery of God, the inability of us humans fully to know the mind of God. Notions of infallible teaching or literalist certainty have been foreign to much of Christian understanding through the ages.

Jesus never seemed to care very much whether his followers thought alike. But, he did care if they had a home for love in their hearts. Did they love God with all of their hearts, and souls, and minds? Did they love each other as they loved themselves? I don't think God really cared that Ruth ... the great grandmother of King David ... was not Jewish ... or that she was an immigrant in Israel ... only that she was faithful. She was made in God's image and she acted that way. The question before us now is "Can we love each other? Can we love with "all" our hearts, and souls and minds? Can we love our neighbors ... near and far ... citizens and immigrants ... Jews, Christians, Muslims ... as much as we love ourselves?" It is a question for our time, just as it was for those in the time of Jesus. It is not a question of origin, or affiliation, or community, or who is "in" and who is "out."

It is not a question of who is "right" and who is "wrong." It is not a question about "citizen" or "immigrant," or Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or another faith tradition ... or none at all. Rather, it is a question of where our heart is set. It is about faithful behavior. And ... for us is this sacred space ... it is about taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. It is about "loving your neighbor as yourself." It is about *tikkum olam* ... "repairing the world."

*'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.'*  
*The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

Amen.