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Because today's Gospel story is a vignette pulled out of its larger context, we might miss some of what's going on here. So let's set the stage. Jesus is in Jerusalem. It's Passover week so the city is filled with pilgrims who have come to make their sacrifices at the Temple and join in the Passover celebration. Jesus and his disciples have come also, and they are making a stir. Right in the courtyard of the Temple. There are whispers that Jesus might be the Messiah—the anointed one sent by God to save Israel from their Roman occupiers. That's good news for some people, but not for those given power by Rome. So some of the Jewish leadership have decided that Jesus needs to go. They are trying to trap him—to make him say or do something that would give a legitimate reason for his arrest and execution. So they engage with him in these debates about the law.

But after a couple of debates, a scribe comes to him asking “Which commandment is first of all?” And Jesus replies, “[The first is], 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.’” And because of the previous tense debates, we aren't prepared for the scribe to agree wholeheartedly with Jesus, even affirming that this is the commandment that must be at the forefront of our living, not even all the rules about ritual and sacrifice.

There are 613 commandments in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. But as the scribes' question makes clear, there has always been tension about which commandments should matter most.

Throughout the history of Israel, there was always tension between the Law and how the people lived it out. Tension within the community about how to be faithful to God and God's commandments. But what both the scribe and Jesus affirm is that all the law, every expectation about how we live our lives, must find its foundation in love.

A wonderful reminder of this is the Book of Ruth. For many of us, what we remember most about Ruth is the passage we hear at weddings. We heard it today, and it's beautiful.

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.  
May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you! (Ruth 1:?)

But as beautiful as these lines are...there's much, much more to this book. It's about loyalty and fidelity and redefining what they mean in the face of cultural norms about who has value.

But let me take a step back. First, we need to know more about this story. More than we got in our lectionary selection this morning. And we need to understand more about the culture and the laws of the time.

This story begins with Naomi and her husband and their two sons leaving their homeland in Bethlehem because of a famine. They become sojourners, and they find themselves in Moab where there is food—a place where they can survive. Now the Israelites hearing this story would have known that the Moabites were sworn enemies of theirs. In the book of Deuteronomy, the Moabites are rebuked for not helping the Israelites when they fled their bondage in Egypt, and the Israelites are instructed, “You shall never promote [the Moabites] welfare or their prosperity as long as you live.” (Deut 23:6).

Those are strong words, but it is in Moab that Naomi and her family find refuge. But that security does not last long. Naomi's husband dies, and she is left with her two sons who take Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. And then, tragically, the sons die also leaving their wives childless, and Naomi, Ruth and Orpah to fend for themselves in a world where women are essentially the property of men.

When Naomi hears that the famine in Bethlehem has ended, she and Orpah and Ruth begin the journey back to her homeland, hoping now to find refuge among her kin. But as they begin their journey, Naomi realizes that it is folly to take these young women back with her. They are more likely to find new husbands from the safety of their parents' households. If they go with Naomi to Israel, they would be foreign, childless widows with little protection.

Orpah, it seems, is convinced of this wisdom and turns back. But Ruth will not, and so she and Naomi make their way to Bethlehem. But even after returning to her homeland, Naomi's sorrow is profound, still grieving the loss of her husband and sons. Imagine how much more alone she would have felt without the companionship of Ruth—Ruth who shared in her sorrow. These two seem to cling to each other, looking out for one another, and loving each other deeply. But they still must eat to survive.

Fortunately, they arrive in Bethlehem during the barley harvest, and Ruth goes off to glean behind the reapers in the barley fields. This is how she and Naomi will eat. Gleaning is an ancient tradition where landowners allow those without their own property and crops to follow behind the workers and collect what is left behind as they bring in the harvest.

In Leviticus 19, it is written, “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest... you shall leave them for the poor and the alien:”

Care for the community, even the foreigner, required landowners to leave something behind. This was a small way of making things more equitable. And it speaks to justice more than mere charity.

The landowner, Boaz, in whose fields Ruth gleans, not only took this commandment seriously, but went even further to protect Ruth. Boaz discovers that Ruth was the daughter-in-law of his kinswoman, Naomi. He would have known, therefore, that Ruth was a widow and a foreigner who lived under the protection of another widow. These things made Ruth especially vulnerable. She could, in fact, have been expected in Israelite society to make a living from prostitution. But Boaz wants to protect her and tells her to do her gleaning only on his property with the other young woman and even orders the young men who are working not to bother her.

By the end of this story, and I am skipping over a lot of exciting details, Boaz has married Ruth, protecting both Ruth and Naomi from the fate that could have befallen them as widows without protection. Boaz could have rejected Ruth as an outsider, following the Deuteronomy decree to never promote the welfare or prosperity of Moabites. Instead he marries her—bringing her and Naomi into his home and under his protection.

Naomi pushes boundaries, too, in this story--bringing Ruth, whom some would have viewed as a despised foreigner, back to her homeland, showing her love and protection. Naomi and Boaz see Ruth as beloved even though the cultural norms of the time told them that she could be, even should be, cast off. But of course, we could also say that Ruth earned that loyalty from Naomi when she chose to be her companion, her daughter, even though she could have returned to her parents and looked for another husband among her own people.

So this story, at its core, challenges the biblical understanding of family. It challenges the norms of what family could be and who deserved loyalty and protection. It moves the understanding of family beyond clan and blood relationships to acts of love and fidelity. Ruth's story of fidelity was an important counter-argument to the prophets Nehemiah and Ezra who preached that Israelite men should cast off foreign wives to keep the community and their religion pure.

The Israelite community, for whom these texts were sacred, could sit with the tension of law and culture and love. Of rigid commandments and situations that called for something different.

So if Ruth and Naomi's story gave Israel another understanding of what family could be, of what loyalty and love of neighbor meant, what lessons might we find in it today?

Because we are still considering the question in our modern times, "What does it mean to be family?" When my parents divorced in 1980, divorce was very uncommon in my small town, and I am my parents experienced some judgmental reactions. But while

there was certainly pain and loss with the breakup of our family, something new came out of that. My parents remarried other people, and my brother and I were opened up to this expanded idea of who our family was—not just in our stepmother and stepfather but in their families who welcomed us with open arms and extended the circle of people who loved us.

Today, we are more comfortable with divorce, perhaps, but the boundaries of what family means continues to be pushed, and I think that's a good thing. Think about LGBTQ brothers and sisters raising children and working to instill the values of love and compassion in their children, just like my parents did, and just like Jeff and I are. I believe what we discover time and time again is that the foundation for family, need not be any cultural norm, but only love and fidelity. Like we see in Naomi and Ruth and Boaz. After all, the greatest commandment is to love as we heard from Jesus and the scribe. And to quote our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, "If it's not about love, it's not about God." May love always be our foundation. Amen.