

Even in a pandemic, people are still bickering and fighting as much as ever, and wars are still being threatened or waged. Unfortunately, it's like adding insult to injury. We are an injured world; we are ill with many losses. So we add insult to injury when we judge, blame, insult, and attack other people over things like: the origins of this virus, about wearing masks or not (One magazine story is "Mask Wars" - Tribal Affiliations!). We are fighting over when to reopen and how to reopen, fighting over remedies, who is working on them, and are they in it for selfish gain? We have too much judging and accusing; we need less judging, less conspiracy theories, and more effort to help and heal one another. We need to let go of tribal warfare and learn to love our neighbors who are hurting just as we are!

So on to the famous story of Ruth. Do you know many people named Ruth? I have known just a few Ruths, Jewish and Christian, probably all based on that Bible story, and how wonderfully loving and loyal was this woman Ruth! As we heard in the scripture reading, the story starts with a famine in the land of Israel. So Naomi and her husband and two sons went to a foreign land looking for food. They went to the land of Moab, and Naomi's sons married Moabite women, one whose name was Ruth. While they were living there, Naomi's husband died, and then about ten years later, both her sons also died, no mention of cause of death. So, in time, the widow Naomi says, I must return to Israel; I need to go back to my home country. Well, her two Moabite daughters-in-law were talking with her, and one of them said OK, I wish you well. But the other, Ruth, said "I am coming with you, and your people will be my people, and your God will be my God and where you die I will die."

Ruth is known as having the spirit of loyalty, an amazing loyalty to her mother-in-law, amazing love of a daughter-in-law for her mother-in-law. Ruth was one who could cross the boundaries of culture, one who could go to a nation that she did not know, one who could take

that risk. She could feel that Naomi was like a mother to her, and Naomi must have felt as if Ruth were her own daughter; they were more than just in-laws. Ruth is not only famous for her amazing loyalty and love to this Jewish mother-in-law, but Ruth in her genealogy, becomes the ancestor of King David of Bethlehem, the house of David. Then of course her genealogy continues all the way to the Lord Jesus, so Jesus is in the lineage of Ruth, in the lineage of this woman who was known for her incredible love and loyalty.

We remember that Jesus also extended his love across cultures and boundaries; he called many his “brothers and sisters,” beyond his biological siblings. Indeed when Jesus was on the cross, looking down at his mother and his beloved disciple, we remember that he said to John, “Behold your mother!” And to his mother Mary, he said, “Behold your son!” Jesus was always widening the circle of family and culture, saying in essence: you have a new family, you have a new mother, you have a new son, a new brother, a new sister. For in the spirit of love and peace, all are like sons or daughters; all are like mothers and fathers. We are all one human family with wonderful brothers and sisters who may not be our biological kin, but in the spirit of love, they are kin.

I find it so hard to think of in-groups and out-groups, to think these are the good guys and those are the bad guys, these are the good nations and those are the evil nations. I have a very hard time with that. I love our opening song that said “other lands have hearts beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine” and “other lands have skies as blue as mine.”

Sure, there are people that do evil things, and nations that are led by such leaders, and we have to name powers of evil and stop them if possible. In fact this past week there was a story about the Mafia bosses in Italy “helping” people, but undoubtedly with insidious ulterior motives; they're going to make them indebted forever, and

then make them pay back, with inhumane actions. Evil can surface easily, and can cruelly take advantage of the most vulnerable.

But in times of natural disasters, we can also seek our “better angels.” If we find a common ground, the same boat we are all in - that is the most appropriate response and the best response: to find ways to help and heal in whatever situation we are in, and to see each other as brothers and as sisters, with skies as blue and hopes and dreams as high. Our final song this morning will be “Let there be Peace on Earth” ... “with God as Creator, family all are we!”

I read a beautiful story, sort of a miracle story as a result of this pandemic. Israel currently has lightened up checkpoints where Arab workers are coming and going. They know they need these workers; they can come and go and now stay overnight as well. And there has been little or no terrorism! They need these workers, especially the Arab doctors, nurses, and essential workers in the market places. So what has happened in this little miracle is that the Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs have indeed found common ground. They are finding common ground because now they have a common threat and they have a common enemy. So in that situation, the common ground is a struggle to survive, and the urgent need to help one another.

Yes, there are so many songs about the ideals of peace and peacemaking. The ideal of a human family, brothers and sisters all! But it need not be just an idea. Let's make it a goal - a goal to find other brothers and sisters in our hearts - a goal to understand losses and suffering, to understand that all have pain and loss and suffering and thus make it our goal to meet every person with compassion. At the last supper, Jesus says to the disciples: “I will not leave you orphaned; I will come to you... and I will pray the Father to give you another “Comforter” (Holy Spirit) to be with you, and in you.” This is the spirit of truth, compassion, and comfort that is available at all times, to all people, to help us realize our common ground; a suffering world that needs the spirit of compassion above all else!

One of the best songs that I know about compassion and having a wider human family, is a song called “Shall We Learn to be Friends.” You guessed it: it is by Ken Medema. “Shall We Learn to be Friends” is cherished gem among those who follow his music. Perhaps as you listen you might think of Ruth, think of in-laws, think of cross-cultural friendships, think of our common ground as brothers and sisters who need each other. Love can indeed “make all things new.”

*You are my sister, even when I do not know you.  
You are my brother, even when I do not show you.  
You're in my family, in love you're kin to me,  
Now you are one with me, shall we learn to be friends.*

*You are my mother, when I fall and when I'm hurting.  
You are my father, please forgive me my deserting.  
You're in my family, in love you're kin to me,  
Now you are one with me, shall we learn to be friends.*

*I need you near me when my hope is gone.  
Come, lift me up and help me carry on.  
Then, when you're weak you'll find me by your side,  
To comfort you, and see you through.*

*You are my daughter, it matters not your race or nation.  
You are my son, my own. May we embrace in celebration.  
You're in my family, in love you're kin to me.  
Now you are one with me, Shall we learn to be friends.  
Let's learn to be friends.*