

*During the days of the judges, a famine occurred in the land. So a man left Bethlehem in Judah to stay awhile in the territory of Moab—he, his wife, and his two sons. <sup>2</sup>The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They were from the clan of Ephrath from Bethlehem in Judah. They entered the territory of Moab and remained there.*

*<sup>3</sup>But Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, so she was left with her two sons. <sup>4</sup>They then married Moabite wives. The name of the first was Orpah, and the name of the second was Ruth. They lived there for about ten years. <sup>5</sup>But Naomi's sons, Mahlon and Kilion, also died. So the woman was left without her two children and without her husband.*

*<sup>6</sup>Then Naomi set out with her daughters-in-law to return from the territory of Moab, because while she was in the territory of Moab, she had heard that the Lord had graciously visited his people by providing them with food. <sup>7</sup>So she left the place where she had been, and her two daughters-in-law left with her. They set out on the road to return to the land of Judah.*

*<sup>8</sup>But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back. Both of you return to your mother's house. May the Lord show you kindness as you have shown kindness to the dead and to me. <sup>9</sup>May the Lord grant that each of you finds security in the house of a husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept loudly.*

*<sup>10</sup>But they said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."*

*<sup>11</sup>Then Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Am I going to give birth to any more sons who could become your husbands? <sup>12</sup>Turn back, my daughters. Go! For I am too old to be married to another husband. Suppose I say, 'I have hope, and I will be married to another husband tonight, and I will even give birth to sons.' <sup>13</sup>Would you wait for them until they grow up? On the basis of that hope would you give up the chance to marry another husband? No, my daughters. It is much more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has reached out against me."*

*<sup>14</sup>They once again wept loudly. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth would not let her go.*

*<sup>15</sup>Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to her gods. Go back! Follow your sister-in-law."*

*<sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, "Do not urge me to abandon you or to turn back from following you. Because wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you make your home, I will make my home. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. <sup>17</sup>Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord punish me severely and double it if anything but death separates me from you."*

*<sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.*

*<sup>19</sup>Then the two of them traveled until they arrived at Bethlehem.*

I've noticed a sad trend playing out in families lately. A child decides to live a lifestyle that their parents don't approve of, and after some harsh back-and-forth, the child, the parents, or both cut off communication with each other. Often this pushes those children to new relationships, friendships

based on total acceptance and a sense of belonging. Now, I'm not making the case that children are always in the wrong in these situations, but I am lamenting the sad saying that I hear too often: "Sometimes the family we're born into isn't half as important as the family we choose."

Is life about what comes easy? Is our existence all about finding where we fit in most comfortably? Is it about pushing people away when they are tough to love? Sadly, we often do treat the world that way. We buddy up with those who see the world the same way we do, and we avoid those whose opinions and ideas make our blood boil. And while this might be better for our blood pressure, it certainly isn't better for our souls. So, let's flip it around today. Instead of thinking about our neighbors as the people we choose, let's think about them as the people we are given by God to love.

If you've never read the book of Ruth, go home and read the whole thing this week. It's only four chapters long. Ruth was a Moabitess, a gentile living on the eastern shores of the Dead Sea. It just so happened that due to a famine in Israel, a family of believers settled in Moab to keep from starvation. Naomi and Elimelek settled in with their two boys, Mahlon and Kilion. But Elimelek died, leaving Naomi a widow. Her two sons got married, but they too died. What a tragedy. Even after Elimelek had died, at least Naomi would have had her two sons to work and take care of her. But now she was left with no one to look after her and no social safety net in Moab to brace her fall. She would almost certainly die in that foreign land if she remained.

But then word came from back home. God had removed the famine from the land. It was safe to come back home. And back in Israel, Naomi would find a system in place for looking after the widows. So, she packed up all she had, including her two daughters-in-law, and began the journey back home.

Along the way, though, she began to think through the situation a little more seriously. She was going back to the place where she would be welcomed and cared for. This move would certainly benefit her. But what would it benefit the girls, Ruth and Orpah? Naomi said: "Go back. Both of you return to your mother's house. May the LORD show you kindness as you have shown kindness to the dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you finds security in the house of a husband." At first, both women refused. So, Naomi continued her convincing: "Turn back, my daughters. Why should you go with me? Am I going to give birth to any more sons who could become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters. Go! For I am too old to be married to another husband. Suppose I say, 'I have hope, and I will be married to another husband tonight, and I will even give birth to sons.' Would you wait for them until they grow up? On the basis of that hope would you give up the chance to marry another husband? No, my daughters. It is much more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has reached out against me." At this, Orpah decided to go back. But Ruth was stubborn. She refused to leave her mother-in-law: "Do not urge me to abandon you or to turn back from following you. Because wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you make your home, I will make my home. Your people will be my people, and your

God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely and double it if anything but death separates me from you.”

These last words serve as a popular wedding text. I would guess many of you chose them when you were married. But why would these words be so appropriate for a wedding? Don't all these brides and grooms know that this promise is spoken by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law? It seems so strange.

But maybe we find the beauty of this promise in the nature of these women's relationship. Ruth did not choose Naomi as a neighbor. She married Naomi's son. Their connection came through the person Ruth did choose. I can't imagine that on Ruth's wedding day, she said, “I love my husband a lot, but I'm really getting married so I can have Naomi as my mother-in-law.” And certainly, she did not expect her husband to die so soon and leave Naomi as her only relation in that family. This relationship was not chosen. It was given. As we know, man proposes, but God disposes. Ruth had plans for life and family, but in the blink of an eye, God had placed her in a different situation.

I think we'd all agree Ruth and Orpah had every right to listen to Naomi's pleading to turn and head back home. They had a family back in Moab that they could return to. They could return to their people, remarry, and start over. That's what Orpah chose to do, and the scriptures don't vilify her for it at all. But Ruth saw a sense of duty to her relationship with Naomi. Who had God given her to love in that moment? It wasn't the people back home. It wasn't some imaginary future husband and kids. It was the woman standing in front of her, the one pleading with Ruth to let her struggle on her own. It was the neighbor God had given her in that moment.

Notice that Ruth's love for her God-given neighbor wasn't tepid. She was not offering to accompany Naomi back home, and when she was settled in return to Moab. Ruth was ready to devote the rest of her life to Naomi, to worship with her and die with her.

These words are used at weddings because the level of commitment Ruth shows to her mother-in-law is the kind of commitment God calls husbands and wives to have for each other. But again, what makes this relationship so special is that fact that these women did not choose each other like a husband and wife. God had placed them together through their unique circumstances.

I'd imagine this account has special meaning to women who have not always had the best relationships with their mothers-in-law. God's call to love our neighbors doesn't just count for those we find easy to love. In fact, true love shows itself in caring for those who are the hardest to love.

That's the point Jesus makes today in the Gospel lesson. He tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, where a Jewish man is beaten and left for dead. Two of his fellow countrymen pass by without helping. They are not willing to risk the danger that might come from it or the inconvenience it might bring about in their lives. But then a Samaritan, one of the Jews' hated neighbors, comes by and stops to help the dying man, giving his own money and valuables to make sure the man who should be an enemy is taken care of. Jesus then asks who the neighbor of the

injured man is, and the obvious answer is the enemy Samaritan, the one who showed love to the last person in the world he would have been expected to show love to.

Again, this neighbor was not chosen. The Samaritan just so happened to be walking on the road that day. God had worked all things so that these enemies would become neighbors in that moment. Who are your neighbors? Maybe, from the lesson of Ruth and the lesson of the Good Samaritan, that list you make in your head is longer than it was ten minutes ago. Your neighbors are the people God puts into your life at any time, from the people you share the grocery store with for thirty minutes to your next-door neighbor of thirty years, the one who's always asking for favors but never willing to help. Your neighbors are your Christians relatives, but also your relatives who disparage your faith whenever possible, and you're starting to think they believe what they believe just because it's at odds with God's word. No matter how disordered or difficult a person is, if God has put you in their path, they are your neighbor that you were made to love.

Of course, even on our best days, the love demonstrated in Jesus' parable is beyond our reach. We cannot love perfectly. But who is the Good Samaritan? It's not us. It's Christ. He found us on the side of the road, miserable and spiritually dying creatures. He gave of his great wealth to mend our wounds, pouring out his life as the balm to make us whole. The one who saw us as his neighbors didn't find people who were so easy to love. He found people who had been given all the blessings of God's perfect creation and had squandered them in sin. But even though we were not ideal neighbors in any sense, we were those people that were placed in his path. We were those he came to save.

Being loved and cared for by our Savior allows us to live more selflessly, doesn't it? His mercy toward us sinners helps us look at the world with merciful eyes as well. Your neighbor, no matter how difficult they are to love, is no different than you were when Christ rescued you. They're a sinner who needs the forgiveness and love of Christ.

Friends, the neighbors in your life are the people God has given you to love. Do not throw away these relationships when they get inconvenient. In fact, it's when they are most inconvenient that you can show the deepest amount of care or concern for a person who is hurting. We do not cut and run when things get hard because Christ did not cut and run when things got hard. He served. He loved. We see a beautiful example from Ruth today too, the woman who understood who her neighbor was. Show faithfulness to those people who push you away, so you can reflect the Savior's love in the way you treat them the opposite of the way they expect. Amen.