

Should I Stay or Should I Go?

Ruth 1: 1-18

Mark 12: 28-34

This is All Saints Sunday when we recall the vast ‘cloud of witnesses’ who have gone before us in paving the way to understanding Jesus and his transformational message for humanity. What is always demanded of those who claim Jesus to be their Lord and Savior is the matter of decision, for a decision is required.

In this decision, it is not mere assent that is expected. To say ‘yes’ to Jesus is supposed to mean more than answering to the question of paper or plastic on the checkout line, or answering the question, ‘would you like a hot apple pie with that?’ I think we all understand that the decision of faith has more gravity, more meaning.

It is binding oneself to a sacred covenant and committing to a certain path in life that affects one’s beliefs, attitudes, practices, and behavior. It is essentially a decision about changing one’s life thoroughly and completely. Admittedly, these changes are unlikely to happen all at once, and would probably be rather destructive and invite failure and defeat if attempted all at once. Rather we know that these changes take place over a period of time. In that time, awareness grows, self-evaluation and the re-evaluation of others and one’s customary beliefs and practices leads to new insights and some altering of the way we engage life and world.

There is something of a paradox about the decision to say ‘yes’ to Jesus. After the first decision, there is decision after decision after decision to be made. Each decision is a time to affirm anew that initial ‘yes’ to Jesus. That’s when things can get rather sticky. That’s when people decide to make compromises or begin to bargain with the terms of the covenant. They begin to re-interpret the expectations of that first decision into terms acceptable to them. They begin the path of forming their own self-serving covenant with a fantasy Jesus who automatically affirms them and their transparent excuses and compromises.

It would be far, far better to admit one’s failure and self-disappointment in not meeting expectations than to begin compromising the terms and enter the path of self-delusion and self-deception. The only one who is being fooled is you; God is not fooled.

If you fail, then you can admit the failure, examine the failure, and address the failure. If you change the terms to your own custom fit, then you never examine or address the failure. Instead, you create a path for the failure’s easy repetition, enabling decision after decision after decision to be a string of repeating failures.

Of course, not every decision carries the same weight. An established pattern and practice of making faithful decisions is excellent preparation for big ones when they come along. On the other hand, a corrupt pattern and practice of accommodating the covenant to suit your preferences is an excellent preparation for future failure when the big decision is required. Big decisions are what lie within today’s scriptures.

We discover that Naomi and her family were Jews from Bethlehem in Judah who move to Moab during a famine. For geography nerds, the kingdom of Moab was on the eastern side of the Dead Sea. The people of Moab were basically considered Gentiles and relations between Jews and Moabites ran hot and cold over the centuries. Naomi's two sons married Moabite women, i.e. Gentiles.

The text notes that over a period of ten years, first Ruth's husband Elimelek dies, making her a widow and dependent on her sons for her well-being. Then during this time, each of her two sons dies, Mahlon and Kilion. This leaves the widow Naomi, and two widowed daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth alone and without support. They have come to a time of decision.

Naomi has heard that the famine is past in Judah and she plans to return to her homeland and hope to connect with family there. Logically, each of the daughters-in-law would likely seek the support of their own families in Moab. But that is not what happens. All three of them begin to journey together toward Judah. This is the first realization that we have that there is a strong bond between the mother-in-law Naomi and her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Both Orpah and Ruth seem willing to abandon their ancestral homeland and follow Naomi into the uncertainty of making their lives in Judah among a people who have very strict beliefs and traditions and practices that may cause them considerable difficulty as Gentiles.

It would seem that Naomi has recognized this problem that Orpah and Ruth will be facing if they continue. Naomi tells them that they really need to go home, back to their own people to make their new lives there. Naomi gives them each a kiss good-bye, but they refuse to turn around and go back. They insist quite vigorously that they will continue the journey with Naomi and seem determined to follow her.

Naomi sees that she needs to spell it out for them. She unloads a series of arguments about why their future does not lie in Judah, or them with her, including her belief that the hand of God is against her due to the deaths of her husband and sons that left her without support. Naomi's own future is clouded; why would they continue with her? It will only lead to pain and hardship.

Orpah sees the merit of Naomi's argument; it's a good one, quite honestly. The scripture does not fault the decision that Orpah has made. It makes perfect sense. However, it is not the decision that Orpah makes that is the focus of the scripture.

Orpah kisses her beloved mother-in-law good-bye, but Ruth clings to Naomi, still refusing to do the sensible thing. Listen to what Naomi says to her: "*Look,*" said Naomi, "*your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.*" Here is the first explicit mention of anything about matters of faith – "***and her gods.***" Naomi's argument to Ruth includes highlighting the difference in faith traditions.

We can readily assume that Naomi was familiar with Moabite beliefs and traditions from living in Moab, and her daughters-in-law were familiar with Jewish beliefs and traditions from their husbands and from Naomi. It does not seem to have

been a compelling issue in the greater household; each had their own beliefs and traditions. Now Naomi has reflected the difference in faith back to Ruth. It's decision time for Ruth.

Ruth knows her Moabite faith tradition and she knows Naomi's Jewish tradition. Her Moabite tradition has multiple gods whereas Naomi's tradition has one God. The chief god of the Moabites was Chemosh, a demanding deity who even received human sacrifices in urgent times. Completely different, the God of Naomi was the unusual deity of a mutually binding, explicit covenant of grace and blessing.

Ruth makes her decision quickly, saying to her mother-in-law: *Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.* We should not imagine that it was some snap decision, some 'paper-or-plastic' on-the-spot choice. Ruth knew Naomi's God as well as she knew her own Moabite gods. Ruth had likely made decisions all along about this God of the Jews. She was ready to make this decision to go with Naomi because she had been on the path to making this very big decision for a long time. Does she stay or does she go? She goes into this uncertain future faithfully.

In the account of Jesus' encounter with a scribe or teacher of the Torah-Law in Mark 12, we first hear that the teacher was impressed by Jesus' answers to Pharisees and then Sadducees who were trying to see how far Jesus would go. It was customary in Judaism for teachers or rabbis to be asked questions about their understanding of the Torah-Law, and to give a *midrash*, or teaching, that would clarify what the Torah-Law meant in particular circumstances.

This teacher decides to ask Jesus his own question: *Of all the commandments, which is the most important?* The question is not posed in any form of ulterior motive; there is no intent of entrapment. It is presented as one might ask a baseball authority, 'who is the greatest baseball player of time?' Someone regarded highly gets asked a question like this, *Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*

Jesus answers by quoting the Torah-Law in two places. First, from Deuteronomy 6 – the traditional *shema* of Judaism, heard even today in every service: *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.* (vss. 4-5 –with all your mind is added by Jesus) Second, from Leviticus 19:18: *Love your neighbor as yourself*, or in the full verse: *Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.*

The inquiring teacher responds in full agreement with Jesus. Yes, there is only one God. He adds: *To love [God] with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.* His agreement with Jesus is matched by his added support contrasting the superiority of the love obligations to God and to neighbor to

ritual cleanliness and religious righteousness gained in burnt offerings and sacrifices in the Temple.

For this hearty concurrence with Jesus' teaching, which is ultimately about the nature of the Kingdom being grounded in love of God and neighbor, Jesus responds: *You are not far from the Kingdom of God.*

It is an expression that is somewhat ambiguous in its 'almost/not quite' nature. There is no invitation from Jesus to come and follow him. And there is no condemnation in Jesus' ambiguous reply. Then again there is also no further interest in pursuing the matter for the inquiring teacher; he does not ask, "Tell me more about the Kingdom of God." And that is likely the point.

The teacher of the Torah-Law felt quite sufficient in his religiously righteous status, in his respected and likely privileged position, and in his skilled proficiency in interpreting the Torah-Law. It was all that he sought and all that he felt was needed.

The Kingdom of God is, of course, about much more than having the right answers to the questions. That may be one aspect of it. Jesus spends a lot of time teaching, his disciples in particular, and his disciples could rarely muster a solid answer like that teacher just did. And if they did, it was likely accidentally correct, or a good guess. Jesus has spent just as much time showing them what the Kingdom of God is all about, what is done by the servant as much as what is understood by the Kingdom servant.

The teacher of the Torah-Law may have all the right answers. That may bring him quite near to the Kingdom of God. However, entry to the Kingdom by the narrow passage requires a decision, a definite action. It is not about knowledge, not about correct answers any more than it is correct spiritual practice, making proper sacrifices and offerings, or being devoted to prayer and fasting.

It is about one's witness to those very love commandments on which Jesus based his answer to the teacher's question. The Kingdom of God as Jesus has preached it is all about love of God and its mirror reflection in love for the other. The practice of love is entirely different from the knowledge of love or even from the emotion of love. The practice of love requires decision, and so entry to the Kingdom as a servant of the Kingdom is defined by acts of loving, being a servant of love and grace and peace.

The decision is always coming to us, large or small. The decision is indifferent to what you decided before; the decision demands your re-affirmation of your commitment to love and to do so as God has loved you. That's the way of the Kingdom and the way of Jesus.

May we make our decisions along the path that leads to the Kingdom by responding to the demands of love and grace with beliefs and actions that lead us into the peace and promise of God's Kingdom.