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Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL

3:39

Why Do They Do It?

Ruth 1:1-19a

I. *In Naomi's life.*

II. *In our own life.*

“Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?”

“Do you intend faithfully to conform all your life to the divine Word, to be faithful in the use of the God’s Word and sacraments, which are his means of grace, and in faith, word, and action to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit even to death?”

If these questions sound familiar to you it is because they should. They are the questions that pastors ask each young person on their day of confirmation. Almost all of you had these (or almost identical) questions asked of you. They are pretty serious questions not to be responded to lightly.

Why do we ask them? A better question: How can we ask them?

We can be bold enough to ask questions of people who are otherwise not yet old enough to vote or even to drive a car because their response can only be given in the affirmative because of what God had already done in their lives.

For most in church God touches people’s lives through the waters of baptism, as God washes away sin and bestows His life giving Spirit to them. The act of baptism is God’s work, it doesn’t depend on us, not even on our ability to speak, or to respond verbally. Of course God’s actions in our lives don’t stop there.

Through the preaching and teaching of the word God reveals Himself. Through the preaching of His word we become ever more conscious of our sin but God works in our hearts repentance and gives us the ultimate comfort of the gospel.

In our lives rooted in the gospel we grow and learn and mature in our faith with the comforting knowledge that God will produce in us works that sometimes we won’t even be conscious of performing at the time. A strong picture of this Jesus shares with us. Speaking of the last day and the final judgment Jesus speaks these words:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his

right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:31-40).

In this world of sin, pain and suffering, there are those who are asking the question: why doesn’t God do more to help people in these hard times? Why have churches seemed to stop growing and so many continue to wander away from the faith?

In our reading from the Book of Ruth this morning we have a vivid picture of our God who has always been active in this world drawing a people to Himself through the Gospel and using especially difficult times to produced a harvest in ways greater than what people can appreciate at the time.

The story of the lives of Naomi and Ruth are quite simple and straight forward. Naomi was a Jew living in the Promised Land at the time of the Judges (after the leadership of Moses and Aaron, yet before the kingship of Saul, David, and Solomon).

During this time Naomi and her husband Elimelech along with their two sons Mahlon and Kilion left the city of Bethlehem because of a severe famine. They traveled eastward crossing the Jordan River and settled in the land of Moab. The Moabites were relatives of the Jews: they were descendants of Lot, who was Abraham’s nephew.

Once settled there Elimelech died and so the two sons married Moabite women which was not forbidden since the Moabites were relatives to the Jews rather than Canaanites whom the Jews were forbidden to marry. The book of Ruth simply states: **“They [Mahlon and Kilion] married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.”** (verses 4-5).

At first the reading may give the impression that that both Mahlon and Kilion had been married roughly ten years before dying. This isn’t necessarily the picture. More likely Elimelech and Naomi with their sons

settled in Moab towards the end of the ten years the two sons married. It is clear that neither son had any children.

Naomi, devastated did what was right in her own eyes. Hearing that the famine had ended in her home land she prepared to leave back to Bethlehem. Initially the two daughters-in-law prepared to go with Naomi. However they were not Jews and in Naomi's consideration there was no benefit for them to do so and be taken from their own people.

“Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” (verses 8-9). While both women at first rejected Naomi's words Orpah eventually agreed and went home but Ruth did not. In fact we are told that Ruth “clung to her.” The Hebrew word here is a powerful one which can even entail the picture of a husband and a wife coming together.

“Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. 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 anything but death separates you and me.” (verses 16-17).

These are powerful words. What made Ruth say them? To be sure there was nothing about traveling to a foreign land as a widow along with another widow even older than yourself with no guarantees that impelled or enticed Ruth to a life of ease. Ultimately Ruth's words have to be understood as a spiritual commitment. A commitment not unlike the words of confirmands standing before their pastor and God as they cling to God and His Word. A closer look reveals Ruth could make such a commitment because God had already transformed her life.

Ruth uses two different words for God in her statement of faith and commitment. The first word is a more general word for God. In the Hebrew it is Elohim (אלהים). The second word however--the word translated LORD in our NIV translation is the name YHWH/Jehovah (יהוה) which is the more personal covenantal name for God. What Ruth promises and pledges however is of the utmost force: “May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.” Ruth was dedicating herself not only to Naomi but far more importantly to God.

Ruth was born and raised in a culture related to but also far different from that of the Jews. Sadly the Moabites did not worship the Lord our God but they worshipped another. The Moabites were idolaters who worshipped a foreign god named Chemosh. Part of their heathenistic culture even included child-sacrifices. When Ruth committed to leave with Naomi she was turning

her back on all of her own people, with their idolatrous worship and ungodly ways.

In the ancient world it was of tremendous importance to be with one's own people in one's own land. Just think for example of how the Jews brought the bones of Jacob? That Ruth was turning her back on everything in her past is made clear by her words: “Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried.”

There are some powerful aspects of Ruth's life that we share with her as we do with all who have faith in God. First, Ruth became a woman of faith because of what God did in her life. The Bible says that no one can come to Christ unless drawn by the Father. (see 1 Cor. 12:3; John 6:44.) For us God does that through our baptism and through the preaching and teaching of His word at home, in our schools and in our church. Was it ultimately any different for Ruth? No.

God reached out to Ruth when His family of faith--Elimilech and Naomi--left the Promised Land during the famine and went to Moab. They brought their faith and the gospel promises with them. This leads to a second powerful point: God often uses tragedies or times of difficulty to produce something good. That Elimilech and Naomi left their home meant that the faith in God would spread to a new land.

The last aspect of Ruth's coming to faith is in some ways the most beautiful. It is what Jesus spoke of His followers in Matthew 25 about performing works we are not even aware of. Eventually as the rest of the book of Ruth unfolds Ruth marries a Jew--a kinsman redeemer--by the name of Boaz. Together Ruth and Boaz had a family. Their son was named Obed. Obed's son was named Jesse. And Jesse's son was named David who rose to the throne of all Israel.

Yes, Ruth is a descendant of Jesus! God has always worked his power in the world raising up a harvest far beyond people's dreams.

Undoubtedly Ruth was drawn to the life that Naomi lived and shared with her family. God's people are a people of love, of confidence and of undying hope.

What do people see in our lives as Christians? What are we showing them? Do they see in us a people of joy because our ultimate gift of salvation rests not on our own works or labor but on that of Christ who loved us so much that He both lived and died for us?

When we speak about God do we give a picture of God to the world of a God of love and a God of outreach calling a people to be His own regardless of their past? Are we a people of joy living in the knowledge that God does use our faith and our actions beyond our wildest dreams? All of these are ours but as Ruth helps us understand today they also belong to every man woman and child whom God draws to himself. Amen.