

Sermon for Sunday, February 18, 2006-Introduction to PASSION: Relationships that are Personal, Active, Special, Secure, Inspiring, Overwhelming, Near and Always New Sermon: Relationships and Passion

Ruth 1: 1-14

John 1: 35-42

It's always interesting to find out how people met. Sometimes it's because someone spotted someone else through a window and then had a willing cousin fix them up. Sometimes their parents lived in the same building, and the adult children saw one another around, and were matched up by their respective parents. Sometimes people were told to watch out for someone else, and in the process, formed romantic attachments. Sometimes people got to know one another at work, and eventually got around to dating. Sometimes people met because of taking classes together. No matter how we meet the people who are really special to us, those for whom we really have passion, there is some sort of call or set-up – some sort of initiation of contact, and then some sort of response to that contact. People agree to go out for coffee, or for a movie, or to talk over ice cream. They respond to one another. They decide to continue the relationship. They begin to learn more about one another, and decide to continue to get to know one another even more. Gradually the relationship becomes more personal. Both people are actively involved in getting to know one another. The people involved become more special to one another. They become more secure in their relationship. They inspire one another to do new things that had seemed out of reach. When overwhelming things hit, they hang in there. And those in healthy relationships find that their relationships change over time, that they become nearer to one another, and that the relationship becomes new all over again.

Our relationship with God is a lot like that. The title of the sermon series for Lent this year is PASSION, because we will be thinking a lot about our relationships with those who are important to us, our spouses, our good friends, those who really are important to us, those about whom we are passionate. We will be considering the parallels between those human relationships and our relationship with God. And when we consider that Lent builds to the Passion – Holy Week, and the culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry, well, the theme of passion seems too good to resist!

Our biblical texts will come out of the stories of two relationships, the relationship between Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, and Jesus' relationship with His disciples. Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law, her hard work, and her obedience all show us some of the things that help to make a relationship strong and solid, a relationship that stands the test of time. To understand Jesus' relationship with His disciples, we will look at the Gospel of John, during Jesus' discussion with them during the Last Supper. In John, the Last Supper is not laid out; instead, John sketches out the scenes of Jesus washing the disciples' feet as they came together to celebrate Passover. John leaves out all details of the meal itself, and focuses instead on the conversation that Jesus has with His disciples, as He tries to encourage and reassure them about what is to come. We can learn a lot from their relationship with Jesus, as Jesus Himself laid it out. We can learn about forgiveness, and reassurance, and fortitude, as Jesus models those things to His followers. In both stories, passion is very important.

Ruth loved her mother-in-law, and was loyal beyond the call of duty, beyond the norm, beyond Naomi's own expectations. Naomi and her husband were living Bethlehem when a famine struck the land. So they moved to Moab with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Elimelech died, but Naomi and her two sons remained. The two boys married Moabite women. In those times before the kingdom began to be united, when the judges ruled Israel, that sort of intermarriage happened a lot. The extended family lived together, apparently happily, but apparently also with no children, when disaster strikes again – both of the men died, so that Naomi was without a protector, and so were her two daughters-in-law. If they had been in Judah, the closest male relative would have been expected to take Orpah and Ruth as secondary wives, to raise up sons for their dead husbands. But there are no close male relatives. The women were without protection of any kind, and, without any protective males around, seemingly without any sort of future. So Naomi does the only thing she can think to do: she decides to return home to Bethlehem, and to send her two daughters-in-law back to their own families. Perhaps they will be able to remarry. At the least they will have some protection. They will not have to go into a foreign land – because Judah would have been a foreign place to a Moabite woman. They will not have to worship a foreign god – because Yahweh, the God of Israel, would have been a foreign god to a Moabite woman. So Naomi sends the two women on their way. Orpah goes, but something makes Ruth stay. What that something is we will discover next week. But Ruth knows Naomi well enough to know that she is not going to let anything separate her from her mother-in-law, not a foreign land, not a foreign God. She is with her mother-in-law for the duration.

John, this morning, gives us the call stories of several of the earliest disciples, starting with two of John the Baptist's followers. John provides the witness as to Whom Jesus is, and his two disciples are curious enough to leave John and approach Jesus. But they don't approach Him as the Lamb of God; instead, they approach Him as a teacher. But Jesus makes the first move, when He asks them, "What are you looking for?" They don't really answer that question, instead they ask the Teacher, for that is what they are comfortable understanding Jesus as, "Where are You staying?" because that would tell them where Jesus was also teaching. Soon Andrew goes to get his brother, Peter, and Jesus both identifies Peter, and tells Peter what he will become – the rock on which the church was built. Jesus initiates, and then Jesus invites the relationship – after all, you don't give someone a nickname if you aren't going to be in relationship with them.

Jesus asked those who approached Him, "What are you looking for?" That is the question He asks us all. The sort of relationship we are invited into is a passionate one, a relationship that will transform us into new creations, new people who are no longer slaves to sin, but rather those who are called to be slaves to righteousness. Those serious relationships don't happen overnight, any more than solid, caring relationships that we are passionate about happen overnight. But they all have a beginning place, a place to start from, a place where contact was invited and begun. As we prepare for Lent, may our own relationships, with one another and especially with the Lord, also deepen and become relationships that we are passionate about, because of the love of God in Christ Jesus that dwells within us. Let us pray.

Ruth 1: 1-14

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered His people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

John 1: 35-42

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, He said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to Him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where He was staying, and they remained with Him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).