

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL  
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**Worship Series: *Focused***

**Service Theme: *Focused Love Looks for A Neighbor, Rather than Avoids One***

**Sermon Theme: *Focused Love Doesn't Count (July 10, 2022)***  
**Ruth 1:1-19a**

She must have felt completely empty. Understandably, since she'd lost everything. It all started with empty stomachs, when a famine chased Naomi, her husband, and their two sons from their hometown of Bethlehem-- which ironically means, "House of Bread"—about 50 miles to the land of Moab.

In Moab, God filled their stomachs. But Naomi's heart was emptied when her husband died. In the Hebrew culture where women were largely dependent on their husbands to provide for them, this was a terrible blow for Naomi, both emotionally and financially. But not all hope was lost, since she still had her two sons. They could still get married, carry on the family line, and care for her. And they did, marrying two Moabite women, one named Orpah, and the other Ruth.

But Naomi was emptied even of hope, when her two sons also died childless. That left Naomi an old, childless widow in a foreign country, whose only sources of help were themselves sonless widows. The writing was on the wall. Naomi was helpless; hopeless; empty.

After a decade in Moab, Naomi heard that there was once again food in the "House of Bread," and decided she'd at least prefer to be hopeless in her homeland. So, she prepared to return to Bethlehem. As she set out on her journey back to Judea, her two daughters-in-law went with her, until Naomi lovingly but firmly tells them, ***"Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness...May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."*** At first, the two young women stood firm, pledging to live with Naomi in Bethlehem.

But Naomi lovingly but firmly urges them to think rationally, not emotionally; to focus on what that would cost them. Naomi wouldn't find another husband to produce more sons for them to marry. And even if that somehow did happen, would they really wait that long for those sons to grow up? But if they left Naomi, and stayed in Moab, they could easily find husbands, and start families among their people.

While it seems they felt genuine love and care for their mother-in-law, in the scales of life, the cost seemed to far outweigh the benefit! They'd likely lose out on the chance to get remarried and have children. Consigned to a life of helplessness and hopelessness in a foreign land. Although they loved Naomi, to show her love by accompanying her to Bethlehem would have been extremely costly! That's why when Orpah counts the cost, kisses Naomi goodbye, and goes back to Moab to start a new life, no one really blames her.

No one blames her, because she's doing what almost everyone does when determining whether to show love to someone or not. We count the cost. Like using apothecary scales, most people will show love to someone if there's at least a balance between what it will cost them to love others, and the benefit they'll receive from it. And at best, the reward for showing love to another will be greater than the cost. But if showing love to our neighbor requires us to sacrifice more than it will benefit us, we often avoid that neighbor.

That was illustrated to me while flying back from Michigan on Friday. There was a family with a bunch of young kids split-up over different rows of the plane. The mom was in the aisle seat, and one of her children was in the window seat, with another man sitting between them. She asked if he would switch seats with one of them, but before he could respond, she added, "You'll have a better seat, and we won't bother you reaching back and forth across you." The last part she added showed that instead of assuming he'd willingly show love by granting their request, she figured she'd have to sweeten the pot. She had to show him how the sacrifice of moving seats was outweighed by the benefit of having a better seat with fewer interruptions. He willingly switched, but if she had asked him to switch his first-class

seat with one in the back with the screaming kids, I doubt he would have! The cost outweighs the benefit.

And sometimes, when we count the cost and realize that showing love to someone will require more sacrifice than it will benefit us, we're quick with the excuses for why we shouldn't have to show love to that person. "I just don't have enough time... enough money... enough energy to love them. Like the lawyer to whom Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan, we're quick to ask, "***Who is my neighbor?***" insinuating that there are certain people we shouldn't have to show love to. People we feel haven't earned our love, by their lack of love to us. People we feel are inferior to us because they're different from us—because of the color of their skin, or their political views, or their lifestyle.

Other times, we might be willing to pay a greater cost to show love to someone, but with the wrong motivation. We'll make great sacrifices to show love to someone, so that everyone will praise us. Or we'll make great sacrifices to show love to someone, because it makes us feel good about ourselves. Or we'll make great sacrifices to show love to someone, because we think we'll earn God's love by it. But ultimately, doesn't that motivation come from love for ourselves, instead of love for our neighbors?

Like the title of our sermon series, failing to show sacrificial love to others is certainly a symptom of being "focused." That is, being focused...on ourselves! As sinners with an inherently selfish sinful nature, our factory setting focus will always be on whatever feels most beneficial for ourselves. Therefore, anyone that might not benefit us personally is viewed not as a needed recipient of our love, but as distractions from our self-focus that should be avoided.

But as Jesus tells and shows in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, love for our neighbor isn't some nice, optional action we can do if it benefits us. Loving our neighbor is a matter of life and death! God's law can really be boiled down to two main focuses: "***Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind***"; and "***Love your neighbor as***

***yourself.***" As Jesus says, "***Do this and you will live.***" And through the Good Samaritan, Jesus shows us that everyone is our neighbor, deserving of our love. And that love ought to be given willingly, selflessly, and sacrificially, even when the cost of loving them is far greater than the reward.

That means **Focused Love Doesn't Count.** That is, focused love doesn't count...the cost. It doesn't require a balance or surplus on the P+L statement. Focused love simply loves our neighbor, no matter the cost!

That's the kind of shocking, counter-cultural love that Ruth shows to Naomi. Ruth sacrificially loved Naomi by going with her to Bethlehem, because she wasn't counting how much it could cost her to do so. She simply saw Naomi's need, and loved her. As Ruth beautifully vowed, "***Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God...May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.***"

By her words, it's clear that Ruth's motivation to love Naomi wasn't to benefit herself or make her feel better about herself. Rather, this Moabite woman, through her marriage and relationship with these God-fearing people, was motivated to love Naomi, because she loved God. Ruth uses "LORD," God's covenant name, showing that she trusted in God's faithfulness in keeping his promises to love, bless, and provide for his people.

Ruth could love sacrificially because she wasn't focused on herself. She was focused on God. And when we focus on God instead of ourselves, we see people not as distractions from our self-focus, but with the kind of love and compassion that the Good Samaritan shows, the kind of love and compassion that Jesus showed to us! When God's love is the focus of our lives, it completely transforms the way we live, and love others!

Ruth didn't show love to Naomi because she knew how God would bless her through it, as if it were contractual, "I'll show love to her

God, but you better do something for me in return.” That would be no different than balancing the scales and weighing the cost! No, Ruth showed this love to Naomi even when the landscape looked bleak and hopeless.

But if you know the rest of the story of Ruth, you know how God richly blessed and cared for Ruth after she showed such selfless, sacrificial love for Naomi. I’d encourage you to take a few minutes to read the whole book of Ruth later, but through a selfless, God-fearing man in Bethlehem named Boaz, God blessed Ruth with a husband, and eventually a son named Obed.

That might just sound like a nice story about how we should love our neighbors selflessly and sacrificially like Ruth. And certainly, we want to emulate Ruth’s love! But the way God blesses Ruth for loving Naomi isn’t just divine carrot dangled in front of our noses to get us to love our neighbor. It’s the only reason we can love our neighbors without counting the cost!

Maybe you caught it during the reading, but Naomi’s family, and also Ruth’s husband Boaz were ***“Ephrathites from Bethlehem.”*** Maybe that brings to mind the prophet Micah, who foretold, ***“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”*** From the Bethlehem Ephrathites would come the greatest ruler of all.

If you trace Ruth and Boaz’s family line, their son Obed is the father of Jesse. And Jesse is the father of another famous king from the little town of Bethlehem, King David. But David had already come and gone when Micah prophesied. That means, an even more important King was coming from that family line of David—Jesus Christ.

Through Ruth’s selfless, sacrificial love for Naomi, God continued the promised line of the Savior of the world! That’s vitally important, because we don’t just need an example of loving our neighbor. We need a Savior who can redeem us for the damning sins of failing to love our neighbors as God commands! Through Ruth, God brought

forth the one who never counted the cost; who willingly sacrificed everything and suffered hell not for his benefit, but for ours; whose focus wasn’t on self, but on saving you! It’s only because of Jesus’ perfect, selfless, sacrificial love that we have been emptied of guilt, filled with his righteousness, and set free from our slavery to sin!

And it’s only when our focus is on Jesus’ perfect, selfless, sacrificial love for us that we can be properly motivated and empowered to love our neighbor without counting the cost! As Paul writes in Galatians, ***“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh, rather, serve one another humbly in love.”***

Because we’ve been justified by Jesus, we don’t have to try justifying ourselves by loving others. Because Jesus has made us fully accepted in God’s sight, we don’t have to try winning everyone’s approval by loving others. Because we know God has promised to love and care for us, we don’t need to count the cost of loving others. Instead, we’ve been set free from focusing on ourselves, so we can focus on loving our neighbor. For no other reason than because Jesus loves us, and because Jesus loves our neighbor!

Through the selfless love of Ruth and Boaz, God once again filled emptied Naomi. Just think, how will God use your selfless love to fill your neighbor, and bless you? Through Jesus’ selfless love, we have been set free, filled, and focused...to go and find out!