

Everyone will agree when I say that one of the most beautiful words in the world is mother.

M-o-t-h-e-r.

It doesn't matter where you go, mothers, out of genuine love, give their lives to their children; mothers will do anything for their family. We all have mothers, living or dead, in our hearts and we will never forget them. Mother, it is one of the prettiest and holiest names in the world.

But what about the word, mother-in-law? It is a little different. To some women, “mother-in-law” is a term dangerous enough to strike them with fear.

Many married women sometimes have to hold their breath a little bit and walk lightly around their husband's mother.

But there is an amazing story in the book of Ruth that tells us what the relationship between a woman and her mother-in-law should be like.

Naomi and her husband had two teenage boys and this family had to leave Bethlehem when there was terrible famine in the country. Luckily, they found refuge in Moab and settled there. The two boys later found local girls there and got married.

But things didn't turn out good. The father died soon and their married two sons also died without any children. What a sad story!

What we have left are three women: Naomi, and her two young daughters-in-law. I should say, three widows.

We are talking about an ancient world where everything is done by men; so there was no way for this family to have a chance to survive.

Now, Naomi hears that things are now better in Bethlehem and she

decides to return home. So the first thing she does is call on the two girls to find other men and move on. She said, “Listen, girls, I know you love me and I love you dearly too. But this is the reality; this is your homeland; you have a better chance here; don’t follow me; I have nothing to give you.”

But both of them said, “No, you are our mother; we cannot let you go alone; we are going back with you to your people, mother.” The text says, three of them cried together.

Naomi said, “No, you are too young; stay here and look for other men.”

In the end, one of them decided to stay. But the other one, whose name was Ruth, said, “Mother, 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.”

Wow...

It is just an amazing story. The whole book of Ruth has only 4 chapters. And if you read them, you will find how the two women, Ruth and Naomi, love each other, and how they care for each other.

Some people ask why this book is in the Bible in the first place. It doesn’t say much about God.

But I suspect there is one reason; as we read from today’s text, Ruth, the young widow from Moab, became King David’s great-grand mother; that means, she was used by God to be one of Jesus’ ancestors. If you look at Matthew 1:5, her name is listed on Jesus’ genealogy.

Sometimes what we find in the Bible sounds like a joke. Who would have thought that the genealogy of Jesus Christ would have a poor widow like Ruth who had to pick up some grain left by other people to support herself and her mother-in-law?

In our culture, we talk about sacrifice. But mostly, the sacrifice we promote is for our own sake.

We are invited to make sacrifices in order to benefit ourselves in the end. My employer or my school or my health club promises me that my sacrifices will lead to my success, to my fitness, to my self-improvement, to my promotion.

Sacrifice in popular culture is a calculated investment, and the return is all about self.

The kind of sacrifice we see in scripture, however, is not about self.

It is about giving up ourselves for the sake of others.

Just imagine what you would have done if you were in Naomi’s situation. Here is your daughter-in-law who just lost her husband, who was your son. Now she wants to stick with you instead of moving on with her life.

Let’s say, you had a lot of money; that would have been a different story. But you are broke.

There was no reason for her to stay with you. I mean she could still remain connected, but not in this way. But this young woman was very clear about her intention when she said:

“Mother, where you go I will go; where you die I will die....”

According to their law in Deuteronomy 25, it was a brother’s duty to marry his deceased brother’s wife. He and his deceased brother’s widow were to give birth to a first-born son. This son would be named after the deceased husband to perpetuate his name and family line. This son would also receive the deceased husband’s inheritance.

But in this case, Naomi did not have other sons for Ruth to marry.

The bottom line is this: Ruth was willing to give 100% of herself to her mother-in-law and this commitment and sacrifice were recognized by God.

There is no calculation!
There is only loyalty and loving-kindness.

The same thing is mentioned in the Gospel text.

Mark’s Gospel draws our attention to another widow who gives all she has.

While there were other people who could give more, Mark says, Jesus’ eyes were unto this poor widow.

This poor woman put only a couple of coins into the treasury but she was praised by Jesus.

Many things could be said on this but there is one point which I think is fundamentally important here.

This woman gave *all* she had.

All means all, not half, not 75%, not 95%, but 100%.

Giving all means she emptied herself; her pocket became empty now; so was her heart. That means, she was ready to be filled with the love of God. She was ready to be filled with the fullness of God.

That was a good lesson to preach. And that was what Jesus did; he gave all he had for humanity.

But what strikes me the most is this: the text says Jesus "sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury."

To me, the image is very compelling.

Personally, for me, giving is joy.

I would like to give what I have as much as I can; I especially believe that giving my time is giving part of my life. That is more important than anything else.

But when I see here the image of Jesus sitting and watching people give, that scares me.

My hope is certainly to hear Jesus say: “Brother, you did give more than anyone else because you gave all.”

But do I give all? That is the question lingering in my head.