“The Question Box”

One of my favorite books in the Bible is also one of the shortest The book of Ruth is a little tale of loyalty and grief and the friendship of women. And like all happy tales it ends in a wedding. But it begins when Naomi and her husband Elimelech, who come from the town of Bethlehem, take flight in a time of famine and seek refuge in the neighboring country of Moab. There they live together, until one day their two sons grow to take wives from among the local maidens. Because it’s such a short book, there’s not much prelude before Naomi’s husband Elimelech goes to his grave, while her two sons also die prematurely, leaving just the three women: Naomi with her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. And at that point, having lost her sons and husband, and having heard that the famine is over, Naomi determines to go back to her own people, in the land of Judah.

She tells her two daughters-in-law not to feel obligated toward her. Orpah and Ruth are still young and might re-marry, she reminds them, if they decide to remain behind in their own land and among their own gods. Don’t waste your energies on a disappointed, bitter old woman, she tells them. Then, according to the Bible, “Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and returned to her people, but Ruth clung to her.”

“Do not urge me to go back and desert you,” Ruth answered. “Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. I swear a solemn oath before the Lord your God: nothing but death shall divide us.”

It’s an extraordinary passage, one that I sometimes read at weddings, not only for its lyricism. At a time when women were still classified as the property of men, Ruth’s voice is strong and independent as she makes up her own mind and follows her own course. At a time when the blood ties of clan and tribe were the primary determinants that fixed one’s place in society, Ruth asserts that families can be chosen and that love can be even stronger than the bonds of race or ethnicity. And in a period of antiquity when custom ruled and religion was a hoary tradition handed down from the forefathers, Ruth claims the freedom to choose her own God and follow her own convictions in matters of faith. The path that Ruth embraces is not an easy one–her sister took that route–but whatever hardship lies ahead can be endured and given meaning because it is a path with heart.

Naomi and her bold-spirited daughter-in law travel back to Bethlehem, and there Ruth eventually marries Naomi’s kinsman Boaz. She bears a son, who becomes the father of Jesse, the father of David, destined to be King of Israel. And that’s probably why the book appears where it does in the Bible, sandwiched in between great epics of conquest and dynastic succession. Joshua and Judges, that precede it, tell of invasions and battles, like fall of Jericho and the onslaught of the Philistines. Samuel and Kings, that come after, deal with the rise and decline of mighty empires. Assyria annihilates ten of the tribes of Israel and Babylonia carries off the other two. They’re big books, sagas spanning centuries of history. And then right in the middle comes Ruth, this little

human drama, just two or three pages in the telling, as though to remind us that amid the grand tumult of war and revolution, globalization and jihad, nothing is more important than these intimate bonds of trust and affection that give meaning to our lives. What has often been considered women's work–building and caring for relationships, the realm of the interpersonal, children and family–is just as important as men's preoccupation with making waves and grabbing headlines, the book suggests.

The book of Ruth also points to one of the central contradictions of human existence. And the contradiction is this. There's very little about our personal lives that makes sense apart from the long sweep of history. Our love affairs and heartaches, our little passions and ambitions are all like tiny drops in a great sea of events where the tidal forces of civilization ebb and flow. Except as we make some contribution to that larger flow, contribute to the currents of progress or stave off the undertow, our lives may not seem to count for much. Though we might dream of making a splash, few of us leave more than a faint ripple behind. And yet that mighty ocean of which we are a part is nothing but a dark abyss except as it's composed of people like us, tiny droplets in a vast sea where little eddies of hope and love can briefly swirl into being and then out again. As individuals, we're nothing except as we contribute to what's larger than ourselves. And society, the collective, is nothing except as it's made of individuals like you and me. To be human is to experience the tension of being at the center of everything that matters and at the same time almost utterly insignificant.

Which means, among other things, that human beings are often faced with questions that have no satisfactory answers … problems that have no final resolutions, whose seeming solutions lead only to new and different problems. Someone asks, for example, if nations like ours shouldn't take stronger action to meet humanitarian needs in places like Myanmar or Darfur, where thousands of people are in imminent danger from natural disasters or man-made scourges. Another person in our congregation wonders, why should people in our country, or our congregation for that matter, worry about the safety and security of people halfway around the world, when there are equally pressing human needs–people who are homeless, children who need families, victims of random violence–right here in our own community? Take it as a given that human beings are finite creatures. We don't have time or energy or money or compassion enough to care for every other person on the planet. Where do we focus our resources? On those near and dear, or on the great geopolitical struggles that make the evening news? Do we opt for justice or for love? To choose just one is to shortchange the other, yet as human beings we must decide. It's an irreducible dilemma.

Another question from a parent, walking down Church Street with her young child alongside. The two pass by a panhandler, apparently able-bodied and accompanied by a small dog, asking for change. The money is for the animal, who needs to see the vet, the panhandler explains. It's a familiar scene. In fact, all too familiar to the mother, who walks on without reaching into her purse. What business does a beggar have owning a dog anyway? But a few steps later, her less jaundiced daughter asks her why they couldn't at least help the puppy? It's not the animal's fault, after all. And the mother

asks herself if she hasn't been too hasty and judgmental. What should she have done? Is it better to be wise or to be innocent? Is it better to be cautious or trusting? These are the kinds of questions and conundrums that confront us on a regular basis. And however we respond, our answers will inevitably be partial and imperfect because we ourselves are partial and imperfect, even when we strive our hardest to do what's right.

We repeatedly fall short, even ministers, who are supposed to be a little bit better than most other mortals. So a parishioner pleads, "Speak to us of love. Speak to us of suffering. Speaking to us of forgiveness." I'll try. Another asks, "Why are your sermons so much like college lectures? Can't you keep it snappy, make it uplifting, and under twenty minutes?" Again, I'll try. I'll try to be entertaining and profound, cautious and trusting, a good husband and father who gives one hundred percent of my time to my congregation while also caring for puppies and panhandlers, knowing that just being human really is an impossible task, that we're bound to disappoint ourselves and each other over and again, and that this invariably means suffering, a sense of incompletion or having failed to live the life we ought.

And yet, I said in the beginning that I believe in happy endings, or at least in happy moments that can transfigure all the unavoidable sorrows that life entails. There's a moment like that, for instance, in Boris Pasternak's novel *Dr. Zhivago,* which I read from earlier this morning, and which like the little book of Ruth deals with the gulf between the intimate and the ultimate, between life as it's lived on the personal level and the unfolding of forces of indifferent fate.

I assume you've seen the movie—but let me remind you of the plot. The protagonist is Yuri Zhivago, trained as a medical doctor but born with the soul of a poet, a man who has been cast into the tumult of the Russian revolution, pitting venal businessmen and aristocrats versus communist ideologues, none of whom have much patience for poetry or the sensitivity behind it. Married to his childhood companion Tonia, he finds himself wildly in love with Lara, a shopkeeper's daughter, who herself is wed to her childhood sweetheart Pasha, a young Bolshevik more attracted to the romance of revolution than to the rather frightening sensuality of his beautiful bride. Disillusioned when he learns of Lara's sexual liaisons with an unprincipled lawyer, Komarovsky, who seduced and then raped her as a girl, Pasha leaves his wife and child to join the Red Army, where he rises to the rank of Commissar, taking on the name Strelnikov (or "the Executioner") for his merciless tactics against White Russian partisans. But as the fighting continues, factions within the red brigades turn on each other, and Strelnikov is purged from the party, fleeing for his life to Siberia where he hopes to find his wife and child, Lara and Katya, once more in the town of Varykino. It's there that he meets Zhivago, who has already found Lara and consummated their relationship not only in the flesh but in spirit with a series of tender sonnets before sending both Lara and her child on their way to safety under the protection of none other than unscrupulous Komarovsky, who has now risen to the office of head of the Far Eastern Republic under the new rule of the communists.

Unable to rejoin his wife, and with his enemies closing in, Strelnikov unburdens himself to Zhivago. “None of this can mean anything to you,” he exclaims. “You grew up quite differently. There were the slums and tenements. Dirt, hunger, overcrowding, the degradation of the worker as a human being, the degradation of women. And there was the world of the mother’s darlings, of smart students and rich merchants’ sons; the world of impunity, of brazen, insolent vice; of rich men laughing or shrugging off the tears of the poor, the robbed, the insulted, the seduced; the reign of parasites, whose only distinction was that they never troubled themselves about anything, never gave anything to the world, and left nothing behind them.

“But for us life was a campaign. We moved mountains for those we loved, and if we brought them nothing but sorrow, they did not hold it against us because in the end we suffered more than they did.”

“So you see, the whole of this nineteenth century—it’s revolutions in Paris, its generations of Russian exiles, its assassinations of Tsars … the whole of the workers’ movement of the world, the whole of Marxism and its parliaments and universities of Europe, the whole of this new system of ideas with its newness, the swiftness of its conclusion, its irony, and its pitiless remedies elaborated in the name of pity—all of this was absorbed and expressed in Lenin, who fell upon the old world as the personified retribution for its misdeeds.

“And side by side with him there arose before the eyes of the world the vast figure of Russia bursting into flames like a light of redemption for all the sorrows and misfortunes of humankind. By why on earth am I tell you all this? To you it must be the tinkling of a cymbal—just words.”

Speaking of Lara, he continues, “You can’t think how lovely she was as a child, a schoolgirl. You have no idea. She had a school friend who lived in a tenement next door to us; most of the tenants were railway workers on the Brest line … I used to go to that house and see her there. She was still a child, but even then, the alertness, the watchfulness, the restlessness of those days—it was all there, you could read it all in her face, her eyes. All the themes of the century—all the tears and the insults and the hopes, the whole accumulation of resentment and pride were written in her face and bearing, which expressed both girlish shyness and self-assured grace. She was a living indictment of the age. This is something, isn’t it? It’s predestination. Something nature endowed her with, something to which she had a birthright.”

“For the sake of this girl I studied and became a teacher. For her sake I devoured piles of books and absorbed a great mass of knowledge, to be available to her if she asked for my help. To win her back after three years of marriage, I went to war, and when the war was over and I returned from captivity, I took advantage of having been listed as dead, and under an assumed name plunged headlong into the revolution, to pay back in full all the wrongs she had suffered, to wash her mind clean of those memories, so that it should not be possible to return to the past … Oh, what wouldn’t I give now for one

look at them! When she came in it was as if the window flew open and the room filled with air and light."

"I know how much you loved her," replies Zhivago. "But forgive me; have you any idea of her love for you?"

"Sorry. What was that you said?"

"I asked you, had you any idea of how much she loved you—more than anyone in the world."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because she told me so herself."

"She said that? To you?"

"Yes."

"Forgive me, I realize it's an impossible thing to ask, but if it isn't hopelessly indiscreet, if you can will you tell me exactly what it was she said to you?"

"Gladly. She said that you were the embodiment of what a human being should be, a man whose equal she had never met, that you were unique in your genuineness, and that if she could go back to the home she had shared with you she would crawl to it on her knees from the end of the earth."

"Forgive me, but if it isn't intruding on something too intimate, can you remember the circumstances in which she said this?"

"She had been doing this room and she went outside to shake the carpet."

"Sorry, which carpet? There are two," asks Strelnikov, ravenous for details.

"That one, the larger one."

"It would have been too heavy for her. Did you help her?"

"Yes."

"Each of you held one end, and she leaned far back throwing up her arms high as on a swing and turning away her face from the blowing dust and squinted her eyes and laughed? Isn't that how it was? How well I know her ways!"

“They stood up and went to different windows and looked out in different directions. After a time Strelnikov walked up to Yuri, caught hold of his hands, pressed them to his breast, and went on as hurriedly as before:

“Forgive me, I realize that I am touching on things that are dear and holy to you. But I should like to ask you more questions, if you’ll let me. Only please don’t go away. Don’t leave me alone. I’ll be going soon myself. Just think—six years of separation, six years of inconceivable self-restraint. But I kept thinking that freedom was not yet wholly won. When I’d won it, I thought, my hands would be untied and I could belong to my family. And now, all my calculations have come to nothing.”

The next morning, Zhivago finds Strelnikov in a snowbank, dead by his own hand. There is no wedding at the end. No long awaited re-union with the beloved, except in imagination, in memory, in a never-to-be-realize vision. But Strelnikov doesn’t die without some taste of fulfillment—for while his dreams of a worker’s paradise gone awry, his passion hasn’t gone unrequited. In the end, his life has been given meaning it didn’t have before, that no revolution or counter-revolt could provide, for he has not only given his heart away, but had it returned, richer than before. *“Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.’* Such is the power of love.