

*John Docherty, 2013-09-01*

### **The Ten Major Requests**

Major request number 1. Please acknowledge that I am the LORD your God. I'd really appreciate it if you'd not have strange Gods before me – I was here first.

Number 2. Please don't use my name as a swear word. How'd **you** like it if people did it with **your** name?

Number 3. Please don't go shopping on Sunday (unless, of course, there's a to-die-for one-day sale on).

Number 4. Your father and your mother are the reason you're here, so please give them a break occasionally.

Number 5. Thou shalt not kill, unless the guy has done something really egregious and you have exhausted all reasonable diplomatic means to avoid an ugly scene.

Number 6. Please try really hard not to commit adultery – it can get complicated.

Number 7. Please don't take stuff that doesn't belong to you, even if you really want it and think you're entitled to it. Books that people lend you that end up on your own bookshelves are in a kind of a grey zone.

Number 8. Please avoid saying stuff about your neighbour that isn't true. Even if he's a jerk. There's surely enough **true** stuff about him that you can use to make your point.

Number 9. Please don't ogle your neighbour's wife. Ogle your **own** wife, why don't you?

Number 10. Please don't drool over your neighbour's stuff. By next year most of it will be obsolete anyway.

This is my modern paraphrase of the “10 suggestions for healthy living” that God presented to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It's a compendium of ideas meant to help us navigate the intricate ethical challenges of day-to-day living, and it tempers the sometimes over-zealous attempt to aim for the impossible.

And it was inspired, to some degree, by the story of Ruth.

When I first starting looking at Ruth in preparation for today's meditation, I wasn't entirely sure where to go with it. The choice of the passage from Ruth comes from the Leader magazine, and the suggestion was linked to the summer theme of creation, and had the title “Sharing the harvest”. The lectionary readings don't parallel that theme, but the proposed focus of the lectionary for this Sunday is “Keep on loving one another”.

So my first inkling was to tie these two ideas together and have a look at the injunction to care for the poor, while managing creation responsibly, and couching it all under the umbrella of “loving one another”.

I'll admit right off that it felt a little trite in some ways - a little predictable. And I wasn't entirely satisfied with how things were progressing in my own thinking. When I prepare a meditation I typically ask myself "is there anything in this passage that stands out for me? That piques my interest? That raises questions that I need to grapple with?"

And while Ruth is a great story with a lot of material worth exploring (poverty, gender roles, marginalisation, xenophobia, familial love and responsibility, etc.), there wasn't really anything that grabbed me with any passion.

Until last Sunday.

We've been having a baptism / membership class this summer, and our discussions have been lively, to say the least. We've looked at how Mennonites approach the Bible and confessions of faith, how we understand God, etc., and in the next couple of weeks we'll be looking at how Mennonites understand faithful discipleship, baptism and membership.

Last Sunday, we looked at Jesus, sin and salvation. And our usual lively discussion started to become a bit more lively, verging on the heated.

The issue was mainly focused around this notion of sin, and whether there is still a place for that kind of language and thinking in today's world. In particular, I think the heart of the struggle was the history of how sin, guilt, and the threat of eternal punishment have sometimes (perhaps often, and perhaps primarily) been used as a means of controlling groups. For those in a position of power, tasked with encouraging or enforcing obedience – the prophets, the priests, the pastors, the rabbis, the other religious leaders – this search for purity has sometimes become a weapon to be used against those over whom they hold sway.

When a priest has the power to forgive sins in the name of God, and when pastors and churches have the power to impose shunning, or excommunication in the face of perceived sin and in the name of God, there's plenty of potential for the abuse of power, and the infliction of undeniable hurt.

I've just finished reading Myriam Toews' book "A Complicated Kindness". She's a good writer, and able to paint a compelling picture of tension, confusion, and pain in a particularly rigid church environment. For those unfamiliar with the book, it's not a flattering portrait of Mennonites. At least of a certain stripe of Mennonite. In a nutshell, it describes one family's crushing experience of guilt and exclusion in a rigidly conservative Mennonite town in southern Manitoba, from the perspective of the family's teenage daughter.

The main character's experience has not been *my* experience with the Mennonite church, but I wondered how much of this story, or what parts of it, might echo the experiences of some others who grew up in that kind of fundamentalist environment. Sin, guilt, and harsh rigidity are very central elements of life in this place.

So as I've been trying to formulate my own perspective on sin and guilt in Mennonite thinking, along comes Ruth.

As I said earlier, there's a lot of material in this story. I've always liked the book of Ruth, and, like some other young couples, Mary-Lou and I had a reference to Ruth engraved on the inside of our wedding rings : Ruth 1: 16,17 - "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried, May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you."

So it's a book that I have some affection for, and that I've generally read as a story of faithful love and generous gestures of hospitality and care for the poor, the widow, the stranger, the marginalised.

But it wasn't until I started grappling with the idea of sin and guilt that I began to discover, through my readings, another level of significance to this story.

First off, it reads almost like a bedtime story. The only thing that is missing, at the beginning of the book, is the intro "Once upon a time ..."

"Once upon a time, in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his 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. They lived there about ten years; and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was bereft of her two sons and her husband."

I'm not making that point to diminish the story, or imply it's a fable. I'm simply noting that it has the *feel* of a story, something with a message, or a moral of some kind. It's not given simply as a recounting of what happened back in the day – it seems to be given as an object lesson.

We know that it was written some time after the events described. We're told, right off the top, that it takes place "... in the days when the judges ruled ..."; we're told, in mid-story, when Boaz negotiates the redemption of Naomi's land and the marriage with Ruth, that "... this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel ..."; and finally, at the very end of the story, we're told that Ruth was the great-grandmother of king David, so it's, at the very least, written after David's time.

Now, normally I don't pay much attention to things like "when was this book written?". I tend to take things as they are, try to put them into the broader context of the time and try to pick out what I think is relevant to me and to the people my meditation is addressed to. But in this case, the commentators note the fact that it was obviously written at a later date, not by a contemporary of Ruth and Naomi, and they raise the question : "*when* was it written, and *why*?".

If you look for the book of Ruth in your Bible, you'll find it tucked in immediately after the book of Judges. Okay, makes sense, it does take place "in the days when the judges ruled", after all.

But there is some reason to think that it might be better placed a little later in the canon, maybe near Ezra and Nehemiah. Do you remember the passage that was just read from the book of Ezra? It's quite harsh.

Ezra 9: 1-4 "After these things had been done, the officials approached me and said, "the people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves from the peoples of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons; so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands."

... For the people have taken Moabite women (among others) to be wives for themselves and for their sons. And this, according to Ezra, an important priest of Israel, is a great sin, and needs to be rectified. So what do they do? They do a census of all the family links, and force the "impure ones" out.

To be fair to Ezra, and other like him, the Hebrews had received instructions from Moses not to intermarry, particularly with the Moabites, because "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you."

(Deut. 23:3,4) The injunction may seem a bit spiteful, but it is very clear : do not do this thing.

So in one sense, Ezra is standing on very solid theological ground. God has said “Thou shalt not”, and Ezra says “Thou shalt not ... and here is how we’re going to fix this : divorce your foreign spouses, and send them and their children back where they belong (which is absolutely not here, among us).”

And this is one of the things I love about this Book, this collection of disparate voices, all clamoring for their message to be heard. In the middle of a national crisis, in the face of very powerful persons calling for dramatic and unbending obedience to what God seems to have said very clearly, in the heat of fired-up passions that are carrying the day, this anonymous voice pipes up and says :

“Wait ... what about Ruth? Is there room for some mercy and compassion here? Is *this really* the final word on what we must do to be faithful? What about Ruth?”

What *about* Ruth? This woman from Moab? This widow from Moab? This poverty stricken widow from Moab? This woman who dares go into a field alone to glean, making herself vulnerable to molestation from the men working the harvest? What kind of a woman does that? Worse, what kind of a woman waits until Boaz is in a bit of a drunken stupor, then slips in beside him at night, lies with him and “uncovers his feet”, which, by the way, seems to be something of a euphemism for a more intimate uncovering. What kind of a woman does that?

Well for one thing, the kind of woman who is the great grandmother of one of the greatest kings Israel has known. The kind of woman who, then, is also an ancestor of Jesus himself.

The kind of woman who has promised to her mother-in-law that “where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried, May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.”

Please note that this sounds also a little like Patricia’s story of Levi, who goes to synagogue to be with God, and Levi’s friend who goes to synagogue to be with Levi. Ruth’s dedication to God is really an extension of her devotion to Naomi : your God will be my God. But it is real dedication nonetheless.

That’s some woman!

And the portrait of this woman is held up right beside the injunction to having nothing to do with that kind of woman. What are we supposed to do with that? Do we hold hard and fast to a rigid code of behaviour that brooks absolutely no deviance, or do we turn a blind eye, on the other end of the spectrum, to behaviour that we've been warned against?

Happily, we have the passage that was read from the Gospel of John to give us some help here. The scribes and Pharisees bring a woman who has been caught in adultery. There's no mention of the man who must have been involved with her, but I'll leave that detail alone at this point. They confront Jesus with the law of Moses, which states unequivocally that she should be put to death by stoning.

Now Jesus is quoted elsewhere as saying that he hasn't come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill what they anticipate. The scribes and Pharisees seem to think they've set the perfect trap for him, and the rubber is about to hit the road in terms of his teaching. Is he, or is he not, faithful to the teachings of Scripture?

Well, of course, he *is* faithful to the teachings of Scripture. Because this beautiful Book is full of stories of ordinary men and women who are struggling to lead faithful lives. It is most certainly *not* a compilation of heroes and heroines, flawless beings whose immaculate lives are a beacon of purity for the rest of us. It's an earthy, gritty, sometimes gut-wrenching account of failure, sin, murder and betrayal.

From the creation story of Adam and Eve, to Cain and Abel, to Jonah and Nineveh, to Samson and Delilah, to David and Bathsheba, to the myriad episodes in the lives of the Hebrews when they fell far short of what was expected of them, to Peter's betrayal of Jesus, to the conflicts in the early church, this Book is a "Who's who" of imperfect, ordinary humanity.

But it's also a book of mercy, compassion and, ultimately, redemption.

In Peter and Elfrieda Dyck's book "Up from the Rubble", there is a wonderful passage where Peter is engaged in a discussion with a woman in one of the colonies in Paraguay after the Second World War. Apart from the harsh challenges of clearing land and building farming communities from scratch, these people were refugees from Europe, and many had been forcibly separated from spouses in Stalinist Russia. There was a lot of loneliness, heartache, and the ethical dilemma of not knowing whether the spouses were alive or dead, and whether they would ever be reunited. The leaders in the community decided that if a spouse hadn't been located after seven years, they would permit remarriage, on the presumption that the missing spouse was dead.

But, of course, 7 years is a long time when you are lonely, vulnerable, desperately want children and family, and are convinced that the missing spouse will likely never again be a part of your life.

So, the very natural thing happened. People began to gravitate towards each other for companionship and affection. Relationships developed, and common-law marriages became, if not the norm, at least more a part of the community fabric than would have been the case back in Russia.

The woman Peter was speaking to had decided not to enter into a common-law relationship out of principle, but she was adamant that that didn't make her better or more pious than the men and women who had decided otherwise.

I'll pick up Peter's account, quoting this woman :

“One day this will all be history. Then we and others will look back and ask what lesson we have learned and what was most important in the healing process. Today we are hurting. The wounds are still there. Only God knows about all the sighs and tears, the sleepless nights, and the struggles of the soul.

“I believe that in ten or twenty years, when more normal conditions have returned, we will look back and say that the greatest single healing factor was compassion. I can see it already now. Where people point fingers, where the tongues wag, where the preachers condemn, where North Americans give advice from a distance, there the hurt increases and healing is retarded. But wherever there is compassion and mercy, where people empathize even with those who have broken the rules, there you find healing and hope growing again, like a tender plant after the fire has swept everything away.”

“Liesbeth, you have helped me so much,” Peter said. “I hesitate to ask just one more question: What about the purity of the church if you tolerate that kind of behaviour?”

Without a moment's hesitation, Liesbeth replied, “Preach it! Preach about the church without spot or wrinkle. The question is, how do you get to be that kind of a pure church? By commandments or by mercy? By emphasizing justice or by emphasizing love and compassion? I'm not a preacher, but I think there ought to be a lot more forgiveness. I have a hunch that if we don't forgive on earth, one day we're going to get what we deserve : justice.”

So, do Mennonites still believe in sin, and the presence of evil in our world? I think the answer to that is yes, we do. We *do* believe that we are called to be better than we usually are, that we should strive to be perfect as God is perfect. We *do* believe that the 10 commandments are 10 *commandments*, not 10 major requests, or 10 suggestions for

healthy living. We *do* believe that it matters how we live our lives, and how we treat each other. And we *do* believe that we are accountable to each other for the things we do.

But we also believe that falling short is not the final nail in the coffin. We *all* fall short at some point or another. We *all* have ways that make us prone to hurtful, or inappropriate behaviour. And we *all* have a responsibility to each other to relate in ways that build up rather than tear down.

Please note that God never intervenes directly in the book of Ruth, though there are references to God and to God's blessing. There are no divine visions, no dreams, no voices from the clouds, no miracles that bend the laws of nature. But there *is* divine intervention. All of the redemption of this book is achieved through the human agencies of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz as they strive to be faithful, flawed though they might be.

So let me close with Jesus' words to the woman caught in adultery : "Neither do I condemn you; go, and sin no more."