

Welcoming the Stranger

The Book of Ruth

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In the days when judges ruled the land, the Bible tells us, there was a famine, and a certain man of Bethlehem went to live in the country of Moab. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife was Naomi. They went into the Moab and remained there. But Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons, who took Moabite wives. The name of one wife was Orpah, and the name of the other was Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, Naomi's two sons also died, so that she was left without her two sons or her husband.

Then Naomi heard that the famine back in Bethlehem was over and there was plenty to eat there, so she started to return to Bethlehem. She said to her 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." Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and went back to her home. But Ruth clung to Naomi, saying, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

The two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. It happened that they arrived there just at the beginning of the barley harvest. And Ruth said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain, behind someone in whose sight I may find favor." The problem, you see, was how Naomi and Ruth would survive. Elimelech had owned some land in Bethlehem, but there was nothing planted on it for them to reap. They didn't have husbands to support them. They didn't have jobs. They were poor and in danger of starving, even in a land that was no longer in famine. So, Ruth turned to gleaning, which is the practice of allowing poor people to come along behind reapers and pick up grain that has fallen by the wayside. Gleaners get the meager leftovers of the harvest, probably just enough to keep starvation away for now, but not nearly enough for the winter. Gleaning is for desperate people.

As it happened, Ruth gleaned in a field belonging to a man named Boaz. Boaz was a prominent farmer who was a kinsman of Naomi's husband Elimelech. Just then Boaz arrived and asked his servant, "To whom does this young woman belong?" The servant answered, "She is the Moabite who came back with Naomi." Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field, but keep close to my young women. I have ordered the young men not to bother you." Then Ruth fell with her face to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" A foreigner – and worse still, a Moabite. One of "them." But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of her husband has been told to me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!"

When Ruth went back to glean, Boaz instructed his young men, "Let her glean even among the standing sheaves. You must also pull out some handfuls for her from the bundles and leave them for her to glean." So, Ruth gleaned in the field until evening, and she gleaned about a bushel of barley." When Naomi saw how much she had gleaned, she said to Ruth, "Where did you glean today?" And Ruth said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." Then Naomi said, "Blessed be! This man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin."

After the barley harvest was finished, Naomi said to Ruth, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you. Boaz is winnowing the barley tonight at the threshing-floor. Now wash and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing-floor; but do not make yourself known to him until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, go and lie down there, and he will tell you what to do." This is actually similar to some courtship rituals in at least one agriculturally based West African people.

So, Ruth went down to the threshing floor and did just as Naomi had instructed her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk (and drunk a little more), and he was in a "contented" mood, he fell asleep at the end of the heap of grain. Then Ruth came quietly and lay down beside him. At midnight Boaz rolled over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman! He said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin."

He said, "May you be blessed by the Lord.... You have not gone after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, do not be afraid; ... for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman."

Now, Boaz was a near relative of Naomi and Ruth, but he was not actually the nearest relative. There was another man who had both the right and the responsibility to marry Ruth and provide an heir for Elimelech. So, Boaz went to the city gate to find this man and make him a business proposition. Boaz then said to the next-of-kin, "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So, I thought I would tell you of it and say: If you will buy it, buy it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you." So, the other man said, "I will redeem it." Then Boaz said, "The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Naomi's son." At this, the next-of-kin said, "Um, um, um ... I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take the right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it."

Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to his sons. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, to be my wife." So, Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they came together, she bore a son. They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, who was the father of the great king David, and the eventual ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth. Here ends the story.

I love the story of Ruth because it is just so darn subversive! It is a an appealing love story, but under the surface is this delicious, subversive message about who is valuable in God's sight, who is to be welcomed in God's name.

There are a lot of famous Israelites in the Bible who married outsiders: Joseph, Moses, Solomon (many times over), just to name a few. Many of the writers of the Hebrew scriptures hated this intermarriage. They railed against it. They believed that shunning foreigners was absolutely necessary so that the nation of Israel could remain pure. Moabites were particularly to be shunned. Deuteronomy even says that no Moabite or any of their children for ten generations could be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Yet here we have the story of Ruth, a Moabite, being celebrated and affirmed as the ancestor of King David – not ten generations later, but only three.

This story was recorded just after the Babylonian exile, at a time when the push for national purity was at its height. And this story gives a big old poke in the eye to those who would place purity above people. Foreigners are people, too, this story says. They should be welcomed into Israel. Even Moabites should be welcomed. Ruth was a Moabite. Without her there would be no King David, who brought us all together into one nation, who conquered Jerusalem and made it our capital. Welcome the stranger, this story says, even the strangers you despise the most. And do it not out of pity for "those people," but because "those people" are good people, the story says. "Those people" are hard workers. They love their families and are willing to risk everything for them. "Those people" are not a threat to us; they actually make us better when they choose to join us. Welcome the stranger, this story says.

I think it is easy for us to think about welcoming a stranger into our church. We would love that. It is harder to think about welcoming all who want to cross our border, or overstay their student visas. Our whole national conversation around replacement theory, the idea that "legacy Americans" (meaning, I suppose, white Americans) are being replaced by others who are not like us – that whole conversation is EXACTLY the conversation that the people of Israel were having when the story of Ruth was written. It is a fraught topic for our nation today as it was for them then. Will we still be "us" if we let all "those people" in, the people of Israel asked. The story of Ruth answers, "Yes, we will still be us. In fact, we would not be who we are without them. Welcome them. Give them something to eat. Make them safe here. Make them one of the family." Jesus said the same thing several hundred years later. "For I was hungry," he said, "and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me."

I don't know how our nation will work out the immigration question. I imagine we will still be talking about it generations from now. I don't know where you will come down on this issue for yourself, and I grant that people of good will can disagree. What I hope this morning, is that the story of Ruth reminds us that our faith should inform how we want our nation to treat people. And I hope that we will always know that welcoming strangers is not just a theoretical question. It is about the lives of real people. Good people. People who love their families and would risk anything for them. People like Ruth. People like us.

Amen