



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida
20 Pentecost - Proper 23 - Year C - October 13/14, 2007
Ruth 1:(1-7)8-19a; Ps. 113; 2 Timothy 2:(3-7)8-15; Luke 17:11-19

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Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die -- there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!

Ruth 1:16 - 17

I love the story of Ruth which was the reading from the Old Testament for today. It is about the plight of a refugee family. It is the powerful story, about an Israelite woman named Naomi who is forced to flee her homeland of Judah with her husband and two sons because of a devastating famine in the land, a famine that threatens their lives....

It is difficult for us in this land of ours to imagine such a thing... Even when we are experiencing drought, as we have done for most of the present year, we still have water running in our pipes....We can purchase bottles of drinking water at Publix....Food abounds in all of our supermarkets....It is shipped into us, not just from all over the country, but from all over the world....We are a privileged society....The truth of the matter is, we want for very little....But much of the world is not privileged in the same way....Much of the world, *most of the world*, is not privileged at all...

In many parts of the world, families are forced to flee their homelands to seek refuge in other places...They must flee because of war, as has happened with many families who have fled Iraq...They must flee because of the threat of genocide as in Darfur.....Sometimes they must flee because of famines and drought and extreme poverty and the fear of starvation....We have seen that in places like Ethiopia and Somalia and we are seeing it in Haiti.....

Well, that what was going in Judah in the days when Judges ruled, and a certain man named Elimelech fled with his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion.....They fled from the land of Judah and went to the land of Moab, which was to the west, across the Dead Sea, where present day Jordan is: Jordan, which is now a place of refuge for many families who have fled Iraq....Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons Mahlon and Chilion fled to Moab, a place where there was food and water; a place where they would not starve to death.....

But fortune did not shine upon them.....At least, it seems not to have....Elimelech died in Moab....We don't know how old he was or how many years that occurred after he had settled there, but it doesn't seem to have been that long. After his death, we are told that the two sons took wives, Moabite wives, foreign wives, named Orpah and Ruth.....Everything seems to go well enough for ten years, but then we are told that Naomi's two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, died leaving the three women to fend for themselves.....

In order for us to understand the full import of this, we need to remember that this was a very patriarchal culture....These women, and especially Naomi, were in a very vulnerable position.... Again, even though women today still do not enjoy full equality

with men in the United States, women in this country and in most of the western world have much more protection and privileges than do women in many other parts of the world....Women are in a constant state of oppression and degradation in many, many parts of the world where patriarchy reigns, which is why the third of the United Nations Millennium Goals calls for the elimination of gender disparities in primary education, preferably by 2005 and at all levels by 2012.¹

That goal is still a long way from being realized....Women in too many parts of the world are at the mercy of dominating and oppressive, often abusive patriarchal cultures.....They are highly vulnerable and always at risk....That's how it was for Naomi and her two daughters-in-law in Moab. They were at risk....They were in danger....Naomi was clearly older which put her at greater risk....In that culture at that time, it was unlikely that she was going to find another husband....

The two daughters-in-law had a better chance...They were still of marriageable and childbearing age....Since they were Moabites, it would be safer for them to remain in their own land and depend on their families of origin while new husbands were sought for them.....Women had very little they could do to support themselves in that ancient culture....If their families did not support them, they often had to resort to begging, or prostitution.....

Naomi, the older woman, was aware of this, which is probably why she resolved to return to her own land of Judah.....In Judah, she knew some people who might take her in and shelter her as a widow even though she had not been back to Judah for many years....Naomi's situation is desperate...Her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth seem to be aware of this....Clearly they have deep affection for the old woman and so they resolve to travel with her to Judah.....

Naomi is concerned about this....She is fully aware of just how desperate her situation is....She doesn't see the sense in jeopardizing the two younger women by having them return to Judah with her....It was not their land....She tells her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house..." (1:8).

Naomi is deeply grateful to them for their concern and care for her, but she also believes that they must begin anew....The text tells us that she kissed them, and they wept aloud. Bless them, though, they don't just give up on the old woman...They say to her, "No, we will return with you to your people" (1:10).

Naomi looks them in the eyes and says very bluntly, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me?" (1:11). She lets them know in no uncertain terms that it would be difficult for them as strangers in a strange land to find husbands, and she is past child-bearing years and cannot produce sons for them which would be ridiculous anyway because of the age spread that would obviously be present between the two women and any child Naomi could produce.

She has a deep heart this woman....She is willing to let go of these two younger women, for their own good....She even believes that God has cursed her and doesn't want the curse visited upon them (1:13). Orpah hears what her mother-in-law is saying and she decided to heed the older woman's advice. She kissed her mother-in-law and departed (1:14).

But Ruth clings to her. Naomi tries to convince Ruth to follow Orpah's lead, she pleads with her, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law" (1:15). Ruth responds with some of the most famous and

cherished words in all of Scripture "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. Where you die, I will die -- there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (1:16 -17).

Our reading for today concludes by stating, that "When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem" (1:18 – 19).

Now in case you don't know the end of the story, Naomi and Ruth do go back to a family member of Naomi's in Judah; actually, it a "kinsman on her husband's side who is described as a prominent rich man, named Boaz" 2:1). In ancient Israel, the law allowed the destitute to follow the reapers of the harvest and glean the leftovers. So Ruth goes gleaning in the fields of Boaz, in order to support herself and Naomi (2:1-3) Word of Ruth's faithfulness and devotion to her mother-in-law gets around, and Boaz acts to keep Ruth safe and to be sure that the needs of the two women are met (2:15).

After some time, Naomi acts as match-maker, and with no small of amount of shrewdness, manages to work things so that Boaz ends up marrying Ruth (3:1- 4:11). Ruth becomes pregnant by Boaz and gives birth to Obed. And the very short book of Ruth concludes by informing us that Naomi becomes Obed's nursemaid and that eventually Obed becomes the father of Jesse and Jesse becomes the father of David who would become king (4:13 -18) It is a wonderful story, told beautifully...

There are some disagreements about the origins of the book of Ruth and a couple of theories about why the story was told and included in the Scriptures...One theory holds that the book was written sometime around the time of King David or King Solomon, who was David's son, sometime in the period between 1000 and 950 B.C. to celebrate the ancestry of David's house and heritage and that certainly makes sense. ²

Another major theory, and one which I find attractive, is that the book was written long after the period of Judges and well after the Davidic monarchy had ceased to exist. This theory holds that the book of Ruth was written after the destruction of Jerusalem and Judah by the Babylonians in 587 B.C., and after the Babylonians had been defeated by the Persians in 538. This theory holds that the book of Ruth was written after Cyrus of Persia, who had defeated the Babylonians, allowed the Jews to return to their homeland following the long period of exile. The story of this return is told in the biblical books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

As a part of this return, there was a strong sense in Israel that their defeat at the hands of the Babylonians, and the resulting exile, had all occurred because they had been unfaithful to the Lord and disobedient to the Lord's commandments. The orthodox movement within Israel felt strongly that God had punished Israel because of this disobedience and unfaithfulness. They began to preach that all the bad things that had happened to them happened because they had worshiped foreign Gods and taken foreign wives....

As a result of this preaching, there was great distrust of anything or anyone foreign and the people of Israel began to act on this distrust. They began to insist on the purity of the Jewish people. They passed laws to outlaw foreign marriages and foreigners were forcibly removed from the land. Interfaith couples were separated and families

were broken up, with the non-Jewish family members tossed out of the community and displaced.....

In response to this, it is argued, an anonymous author penned a piece of dissident literature protesting this unfair and hate-filled treatment of foreigners. This anonymous writer told the story of a loving, devoted and faithful woman who was a foreigner, a non-Jew, named Ruth, who would become the grand mother of the greatest King Israel had ever known..... “Be careful,” this anonymous author seemed to be saying to those who were fostering hatred and bigotry against foreigners. “Be careful...You never now where and how God might be at work.....You might even discover God at work among those you consider aliens and foreigners”³ I appreciate that message....

I think it is an important message we all need to hear today when xenophobia is so prominent in our country and is on the rise throughout the world.....More than anything, the book of Ruth is, as one source quite rightly puts it, about loyalty, love of family and generosity toward strangers.”⁴ These values are, as this same source observes, “universal and timeless.”⁵

As much of our culture continually persists in promoting hostility, anger, hatred and bigotry toward the strangers and foreigners in our midst – the undocumented worker, the political refugee, the Muslim family, the Haitian boat person – as these and so many others are labeled by and dehumanized by our culture, the way the lepers were in the Gospel reading from Luke (Luke 17:11-19), we have another message to offer.....a message like that in the book of Ruth.

It is a message of loyalty and family love and generosity toward strangers. It’s the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, who call upon us all always, to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and all soul and all our minds and all our strength and to love our neighbor as our self (Matthew 22:37-40), whether the neighbor is a Moabite named Ruth, a farmer named Juan, a Islamic Imam named Mohammed or a former Bahamian Defense worker named Roscoe and his family, who are very much feeling the consequences of our nation’s current fear and distrust of the foreigners in our midst and whose lives are threatened by the unjust consequences of this.⁶

I can’t help feeling that we, as a nation, are better than this. The book of Ruth challenges us to put away our fear and prejudices and xenophobia, recognizing that God is the God of all people, and that God’s grace and love are often manifest in surprising and wonderful ways among surprising people, people like Ruth, and Roscoe and Helen Campbell, who are loyal, dependable, faithful and loving. I celebrate that God and am dedicated to that Gospel....I hope you are too....

¹ See <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>

² See The introduction to the book of Ruth in *The Oxford Annotated Study Bible – NRSV with Apocrypha 3rd Edition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 391 Hebrew Bible

³ See The introduction to the book of Ruth in *The Oxford Annotated Study Bible – NRSV with Apocrypha 3rd Edition*

⁴ See The introduction to the book of Ruth in *The Oxford Annotated Study Bible – NRSV with Apocrypha 3rd Edition*

⁵ See The introduction to the book of Ruth in *The Oxford Annotated Study Bible – NRSV with Apocrypha 3rd Edition*

⁶ The reference is to a former employee of St. Paul’s and his family who were treated appallingly by the United States Government in a gross miscarriage of justice.