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Road Trip! Great Journeys in the Bible V. "Where You Go...." - An Independence Day Reflection

Selections from Ruth 1 and 2 NRSV In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi....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. When they had lived there about ten years, both [of her sons] also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband....Then she started to return with her daughters in law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters in law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two 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. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud....But Ruth said, "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....Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man, of the family of Elimelech, whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite 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."....Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." Then she fell prostrate, 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?" But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother in law since the death of your husband has been fully told 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 the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!"

"There was a famine in the land." How many times in world history could those simple but chilling words written 2500 years ago have been used? The Hebrew people ended up in Egypt, the book of Genesis tells us, because during the time of Joseph *"There was a famine in the land."* In the 1840s, one-and-a-half million Irish men,

women, and children – including the ancestors of some of the folks in this room – fled their island nation¹ when the potato crop repeatedly failed leading to the choice between exile and starvation. *“There was a famine in the land.”* About that same time, tens of thousands of Chinese (and later Japanese) left their homelands and families where hunger was their constant companion, most never to return, to work the sugar plantations in Hawaii for *“There was a famine in the land.”* In the 1930s, two and a half million Americans watched their farms blow away as 650 million tons of topsoil were scoured² from farms across the Midwest and Great plains leaving them little choice if they wanted to feed their children than to hit the road in beat-up cars making their way to California³ where they were met with scorn and derision and called, wherever they hailed from, “Okies.” *“There was a famine in the land.”*

Indeed too often in the course of world history those words have been accurate, as they are even today in Somalia and the South Sudan and parts of South Asia, and even in too many parts of this country where one in four children are under-nourished. And too often two things have almost invariably come along when there is “a famine in the land”: **hopelessness** and **fear**. The hopelessness comes in the lives of those who have too little to eat, who cannot find meaningful work, who know the un-rivaled pain of watching their children go hungry. Mark Mathabane’s autobiography, Kaffir Boy, tells of his growing up in 1960s apartheid South Africa, and he says this about such hunger:

I came to accept hunger as a constant companion.... It filled me with ... hopelessness, anxiety, loneliness, selfishness and a cynical attitude toward people.... I was weary of being hungry all the time... I felt that somehow the

¹<http://www.crf-usa.org/bill-of-rights-in-action/bria-26-2-the-potato-famine-and-irish-immigration-to-america.html>

²http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/Dust_Bowl.aspx

³<https://migration.ucdavis.edu/rmn/more.php?id=1355>

whole world was against me. I felt that... the... dream of a bright future... had deserted me.⁴

But along with the hopelessness of those who are hungry comes the fearfulness of those who face them. Pharaoh feared the growing numbers of the Hebrew people and enslaved them. The men who governed the Republic of Hawaii, after they had cynically engineered the downfall of the Queen, feared the Chinese and Japanese immigrants so much that they forbade their children from going to public school or learning to read and write. Too many stories from 1930s in America tell of folks in small towns on the west coast terrorizing the camps of people driven there from the Dust Bowl. For you see, too often when *“there is a famine in the land”* there is also a famine of courage and civility, a famine of empathy and of the desire to see your hurting neighbor not as someone to be feared but as someone to be helped. Too often hard times – be they famine or depression or disaster or social upheaval – leads to seeing “the other” – Hebrews, Chinese, Japanese, Okies – and gays and lesbians and the transgendered and and women and persons of color – as to be feared and walled off from.

Our scripture today, the latest in our summer “road trip” series concerning “great journeys in the Bible” is the story of Ruth and Naomi. Its most memorable lines – *“Where you go, I will go... your people shall be my people, and your God my God”* – we most often associate with the wedding vows that two people make to one another. But the lines are actually not about weddings at all; no, they are said by a daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law. The mother-in-law is Naomi and the daughter-in-law is Ruth. To make a long story short, Naomi is a Jew from Bethlehem whose husband, during a time of famine, had taken her and their two sons to the country of Moab to seek work and food. Their sons then marry Moabite women, but tragedy strikes when Naomi’s husband dies, and then, a few years later, both of her sons also die. Naomi then

⁴Quoted at <http://kaylamitchellproject.tumblr.com/>

decides to return home to Bethlehem, back to the familiarity of family and friends. And she releases her two daughter-in-law from their obligation to serve and stay with her. The one daughter-in-law, Orpah, tearfully accepts Naomi's release and goes back to her Moabite family to start her life anew. But Ruth says no, with those beautiful words: *"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...."* And so Naomi, this Hebrew woman and her daughter-in-law, this Moabite woman, go to Bethlehem. There Ruth, aided in a very charming way by her mother-in-law, makes it known to a man named Boaz that she finds him attractive. The feeling is mutual and soon Ruth and Boaz are married. But it wasn't just physical attraction, no it was the attraction of Ruth's integrity and ethics and her loving spirit. For did you hear what Boaz said to Ruth: *"All that you have done for your mother in law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left... 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!"*

This is a lovely story, isn't it? But, you may wonder, why is it in the Bible? Why did our Jewish forebears affirm this as Holy Scripture, worthy of having something to teach us? Well, it goes back to what too often happens when change in a society is happening— be it famine or some other upheaval – and the choice is between **fearfulness and faithfulness**. You see,⁵ the book of Ruth was written at the same time as the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah were calling for patriotic purity. It was a time of upheaval, a time when Israel faced what we might call the challenge of multi-

† he remainder of this and the following paragraph borrows heavily and gratefully ideas and phrasings from the Rev. Barbara Blaisdell's "Resurrection Women: II. The Patient Power of God's Heart," presented at United Methodist Women's Retreat of the Big Island, Honoka'a, Hawai'i, May 13, 2006

culturalism. Leaders worried about how many new people, how many outsiders, how many foreigners, Israel could take in without losing its own identity.”⁶ They worried about “those people” who were “different.” These prophets therefore decided that good Jews should no longer marry foreigners for fear of watering down the tradition, of creating something new instead of hewing to the old.

But here’s the thing: the Bible is not simply a book of verses without a context. No, very often it is actually a **conversation** between **competing** ideas. And the wisdom of our forebears is that **both sets of ideas are often preserved**. That is what happened here: this story of Ruth was preserved and included along with the anxious decrees of Ezra and Nehemiah. For the story of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz offers an opposing view, an appeal not for purity but for inclusivity. During the time of Ezra’s and Nehemiah’s proclamation of that harsh law against inter-religious and inter-racial marriage, the book of Ruth offers a counter-view: the story of a foreigner, a pagan, a heathen, one who is “the other,” one who is “different” who marries into the Jewish faith and proves to be a wonderful gift to that community of faith.

I said earlier that Boaz was attracted to Ruth because of her loyalty, her integrity, her ethics. But there is more. When Naomi told Ruth and Orpah that they should go back to their mothers’ homes, do you remember what Naomi said to them? She thanked them for having dealt so “kindly” with her. But the word “kindly” is a very pale translation of what is, in the Old Testament, a very, very powerful word, the word “*hesed*.” **Hesed**. Barbara Blaisdell says this of the word:

Hesed is tenacious love. It is the word for stubborn, ever-present, won’t-go-away-no-matter-what-you-do kindness and mercy.... Naomi recognizes that these two young women have been tenaciously, stubbornly loving – and that their tenacious, stubborn love, like all human love, has originated with God’s

⁶ibid.

love.⁷

That's what Boaz saw in Ruth – that no matter that she was a foreigner, one who was “different,” one who was supposed to be a person to be feared, that God tears down our fences and overturns our walls with the reminder that God's love, indeed, works in ways that we cannot fearfully fence in through the very people whom we might write off.

That, my friends, is **our** reminder too. The trajectory of this book that we claim as holy is always to widening the circle, tearing down the fences, facing down a famine of fearfulness with love, with hesed. And while not one of us would claim or would want to claim that our country is the same thing as our faith, our faith can and should inform how we act as citizens. What do I mean?

Well, for those ancient Israelites, for Ezra and Nehemiah, it was “the Moabites” who were “the other,” the ones who were “different.” For us, in our own era of upheaval, for some it is “the Muslims,” or those who believe in marriage equality, or those who dress different, talk differently. The story of Ruth reminds us that the love of God and the goodness of God knows no single nationality, no single religion, no single style of life, no single belief system, and that those who are “other” have contributions to make to our shared civic life. The upheavals that we as a nation have faced in the last two weeks are a challenge to us: and we can respond fearfully, seeking to be latter-day Ezra's and Nehemiah's, putting up more fences, presuming the worst about our fellow citizens, denying that racism is still too much a part of our shared life together, and rewarding those who feed on the famine of fecklessness and inflame the biases and bigotries that threaten to drive us apart. Or we can follow the way of Naomi and Boaz, recognizing that God's hesed is bigger than our bigotries, God's goodness is more powerful than our demagogueries, and that God's love is not owned by us and is

⁷Barbara Blaisdell, “Resurrection Women: I. God Hears with God's Own Heart,” presented at United Methodist Women's Retreat of the Big Island, Honoka'a, Hawai'i, May 13, 2006

to be found in people of good will of every ethnicity, every orientation, every political party, every class, every race, every religion – Moabites and Muslims, Christians and Jews, people of every faith and no faith, of every sexual orientation, male and female, Republican and Democrat.

The late Fred Rogers, of Mr. Rogers' fame, once wrote this: "I was spared," he said,

...from any great disasters when I was little, but there was plenty of news of them in newspapers and on the radio, and there were graphic images of them in newsreels. For me, as for all children, the world could have come to seem a scary place to live. But ... there was something [that] my mother did that I've always remembered: "Always look for the helpers," she'd tell me. "There's always someone who is trying to help." I did, and I came to see that the world is full of ...neighbors and friends who are ready to jump in to help when things go wrong.⁸

My friends, those "helpers" are indeed always there in times of upheaval, propelled by God's hesed, seeking to make this community, this country, this world a better place, place of safety and plenty for all, a place animated more by Ruth and Boaz and less by Ezra and Nehemiah, a place where every child is cared for, where no elderly person ever again chooses between food and medicine, a place where institutional bigotry would only be a dim memory, where truly, truly we can as a nation, in the mighty words of Martin Luther King "live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all... are created equal.'" To do so, it will take helpers indeed, Ruth's and Boaz's and Naomi's who recognize God's love at work in unexpected ways and unexpected places. I want to be one of those helpers. Will you join me?

⁸<http://www.snopes.com/radiotv/tv/scarynews.asp>