Ruth, Orpah and Naomi

Ruth 1

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The name of the book is Ruth. The book is in the Hebrew scriptures, and Ruth was from Moab, not born or raised a Jew. There are Hebrews in the story: Naomi and Boaz, most prominently. In fact, one could argue this is really Naomi’s story, as the book begins and ends with her.

But the name of the book is now, and always has been, Ruth. And if there was anyone from the Bible I would describe with a line from the musical *Hamilton*, it would be Ruth: “Immigrants: we get the job done!” Not only was Ruth an immigrant, but she was also from a nation which had always been in conflict with Israel. She was an enemy. She knew this when she cast her lot with her mother-in-law instead of returning to her mother’s house. I am sure that one reason Naomi implored Ruth and Orpah to stay in Moab is that Naomi wasn’t sure what kind of reception they would get back in Bethlehem. Orpah’s choice made all the sense in the world. No blame is imputed to her in the text for doing exactly what Naomi asked. As one writer puts it, Orpah’s behavior is “expected, ordinary and not criticized, while Ruth’s is unexpected, extraordinary and praised,” (Sakenfeld, *Ruth*). And risky as well. Maybe going home wasn’t an option for Ruth because home was not a welcoming place for her, or she feared not being able to re-marry after having married a foreigner, or maybe that she was barren after not having born a child while she was married. Or maybe she really loved her mother-in-law and couldn’t imagine being parted from her. We’ll never know. The story presents her act as one of unexpected and extraordinary kindness to someone of a different religion, ethnicity, and nation. Naomi also was kind to let Ruth accompany her, as Ruth’s presence may have made her own reception in Bethlehem more difficult.

As her story continues, the kindness Ruth embodies comes back to her in the kindness of a man named Boaz, a relative of her late husband, who protects her as she gleans his fields, no small act because both her identity as a Moabite enemy and a woman without a male relative to protect her would have left her vulnerable to violence of many kinds. In the end, Boaz’ kindness extends to marrying Ruth and having a son with her, a son identified in the story as much as a gift to Naomi as for Ruth or Boaz, a kindness from both of them to Naomi, who, on her earlier return to Bethlehem, said people should now call her “bitter,” rather than Naomi, for she had lost everything.

Over the millennia, this story often has been compared to Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan, the story about the Hebrew man who is beaten and robbed, then ignored by two of his own countrymen but tended to by a person from Samaria, an ethnic group in conflict with Israelis. The purpose behind Jesus’ story was to answer the question “Who is my neighbor?” Or, in other words, “to whom do we have to be kind?”

The two stories, Ruth’s and Jesus’, answer that question the same way. To whom do we have to be kind? Enemies? Check! People of different religions from us? Check! People from other countries? Check! Immigrants? Refugees? Check! Mothers-in-law? Check! The poor and low wage workers? Check! Daughters-in-law? Check! People who might not be able to repay our kindness? Check! People who are older, or younger, than we are? Check! And might kindness mean some sacrifice on our part? Check!

I wish everyone who has ever heard Ruth’s poem of caring and commitment to Naomi read at a wedding would both know and live into the fact that it is not about Romance, but about the kind of radical, sacrificial kindness too often dismissed as weak in our society. “I won’t wear a mask because it takes away my freedom!” Really? And protecting children or others who are medically at risk for serious illness or death does not provoke the tiny sacrifice of kindness that putting on a mask shows? “We don’t want more immigrants or refugees here; we don’t want to share our resources with them.” Have you noticed how many of the members of our Olympic team this year come from immigrant families (well, almost all of them do, but I mean more recent immigrants)? Have you heard or read about the kinds of racism and bullying they have encountered over their lives? And yet now they are celebrated for bringing home medals in the name of our country, reminding us that immigrants have always gotten the job done and contributed far more than they have taken in shaping our nation in every way.

# And even if that were *not* so, the book is called Ruth, and reminds us that there is no one to whom we don’t have to be kind. I’ll finish with the Olympics one more time. AP News featured an article this week by Sally Ho entitled “At an extraordinary Olympics, acts of kindness abound.” <https://apnews.com/article/2020-tokyo-olympics-acts-of-kindness-sportsmanship-f7484946288e2a078b2a1f9eccbc1232>

The author notes that sometimes the tremendous level of competition at an Olympics can engender a lack of compassion among rivals. She wonders if perhaps because of this awful year of pandemic, and the fact that so many of the athletes have been isolated and are without their families and fans, that this year so many acts of kindness have appeared. Among many examples, “runners Isaiah Jewett of the U.S. and Nijel Amos of Botswana got tangled and fell during the 800-meter semifinals. Rather than get angry, they helped each other to their feet, put their arms around each other and finished together.” A Japanese surfer who had just lost to a Brazilian while surfing on his home beach in his home country and having had his social media taken over by Brazilian racist trolls, nevertheless stood by the Brazilian surfer who had beaten him to help translate for him as he spoke to the media. And I hope you see the video of the two high jumpers from different countries who were told they could share first place and gold or have a jump off to see who was the best, agreed to share first place, hugging each other, delighted to share the podium and the spotlight.

The book is called Ruth. Her son, Obed, was the great King David’s grandfather, and David might have learned a thing or two from his great-grandmother if he had met her. She is one of only 4 women listed in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew’s gospel (three of whom were foreigners, by the way). Her story is important partly because it is one of the first places in the Bible to address the question “Who is my neighbor?” a question whose divine answer we human beings just can’t seem to get right. A commentator sums up the plot of the book of Ruth as “Two women working together to make a way out of no way.” (Sakenfeld, 12). That’s what we are all doing when we are sacrificially, extraordinarily, unexpectedly kind to one another. Because ultimately that is life for most of us at one time or another: making a way out of no way. If we can make it easier for anyone, why wouldn’t we? Amen.