

November 1, 2015
Woman, Widow, Stranger, Foe
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Ruth 1:1-18

¹ 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. ² 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. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ 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, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." ¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶ 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.
¹⁷ 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!”

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Having never preached them back to back, I never before noticed that Naomi’s losses were far greater than Job’s. Yet he is known as the great sufferer of the Old Testament. Why is that?

Is it because such losses are thought more usual for women, and thus more tolerable? Or because she was poor to start with and he wasn’t? Is it that when poor people’s children die, they have somehow lost less than when the rich lose theirs? For forty-plus chapters Job wants to know why he was suffering so, while Naomi never asks once. Maybe the poor don’t have time for such questions. Maybe crossing the border and searching for food takes all up all their time and energy.

What Job demanded to know, Naomi accepted: the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. And all you can do, as the 12-steppers say, is the “next right thing.”

In this case, that means *try not to starve to death.*

In those days, Judah and Moab were enemies. Elimelech move his family over the border in hope of feeding them - the same kind of forced human migration in the world today.

Just this week I saw on the news: people on rickety boats floating up to the Greek island of Lesbos; rescue workers wading into the surf; and Syrians handing down their babies and toddlers. The workers wrap them in blankets and give them lollipops to suck on. It helps calm them down while other workers help the parents unload and get situated on the beach.

They aren't on vacation. They are desperate to get their children safe.

Desperation sent Elimelech and Naomi into Moab . . . where they did well enough to survive and for their sons to marry. But within ten years, her husband and her sons were dead. Being a refugee rarely gets easier in the first generation.

Naomi was left a woman, widow, stranger and foe - a perfect recipe for starvation, even in a land of food.

She started packing to go home. In Judah, at least she wouldn't be a stranger, though who knew how her neighbors would treat her after being in Moab. Maybe they'll shun her. Maybe she'll starve anyway.

She had no risk-free options. But neither did she sit on the ground and toss dirt on her head. She packed, and planned her trip. Her daughters-in-law, also widows, begged to go with her. She refused them. They'd be no better off in Judah than she was in Moab. Plus, they were young; *new husbands* was the "next right thing" for them. Orpah accepted the wisdom of this, while Ruth refused it.

Orpah is the faithful daughter-in-law, while Ruth becomes the archetype of God's faithfulness to Israel: the God who stands outside human experience yet chooses to enter in; to go with; to endure; to sustain; to befriend - whatever the befriending costs; to abandon the comforts of home, of family, of all that is familiar, and the likelihood of a secure future.

For love, of course.

But also because going with Naomi is the "next right thing" to do ~ for Naomi.

Naomi - who left her own home to save her sons; who ought not to have to travel alone, to endure hardship alone, to die alone.

This, it seems to me, is what people who are interested in the kind of life God desires of human beings can learn from Ruth. Going with Naomi is the "next right thing" to do ~ for Naomi, and thus for Ruth as well.

Put another, more Facebook-ready way: "Not everything is about you."

Sometimes, as with Ruth, the sum of your life at any given moment may have little or nothing to do with your own needs, wants, security, future, ambition or fears. But rather, it has to do with the decency and justice another person deserves simply by virtue of being a human being.

Naomi did not deserve to end up alone. For that reason, *and because she loved her*, Ruth gave up her own future - willingly. And isn't that the story of our own life in God? . . . our life together in God? . . .

what we claim God has done for us in Jesus Christ, who came to us, abides with us: that we not walk through this world alone?

There is one other piece I find interesting. Given its timing, scholars suggest the composition of the book of Ruth was not purely theological, but also political. It first surfaced in the days of post-exilic reform, when Israel was being reestablished by Jews returning from Babylon, around 500 B.C.

Leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah were codifying religious law into policy with a heavy hand on ethnic purity. An attempt to prevent assimilation. One policy that evolved was the deportation of foreign wives and their kids.

Do you ever wonder, friends, if there is anything new under the sun?

So, knowing what you know about the rest of the book of Ruth, how does her story function as a critique, as a protest, against this kind of religious law and policy?

What happened to Ruth? - She married Boaz. (There's a scandalous tale!) She had a baby named Obed, whom Naomi's friends laid on her lap and said, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him."

Not only is it another story of sugar to salt and back to sugar again, but also, a political critique of a government that would sabotage its own future with policies driven by greed, racism and bigotry - cloaked in religious language.

Who was Ruth's grandson? - Jesse

Who was her great-grandson? - David.

King David. King David who built the same Israel Ezra and Nehemiah sought to restore.

The Book of Ruth, and the character too, remind those of us with eyes to see and ears to hear, that God doesn't desire or demand ethnic purity, but rather kindness, and compassion, and generosity and, if need be, even sacrifice. . .

doing for others as God has already done for us, in Christ Jesus.