

What We Leave Behind
Sunday, June 28, 2020
Ruth 1:1-18

Ruth is an unusual book tucked away as it is in our bibles between Judges and 1 Samuel. This story places itself in the time of the Judges. That's the time after the people have fled Egypt and escaped slavery there and have crossed into the land of Canaan. The time of the Judges is also before the people have demanded a king, so the monarchy is still decades away.

If you don't know the rest of Ruth and Naomi's story, it is an interesting one. After getting back to Judah, the women come up with a scheme for Ruth to marry Boaz, a distant relative of Naomi. The children from that marriage secure safer futures for both women. It seems unclear why this book is included in our tradition, except to expand on the genealogy of David – and then Jesus. Ruth's marriage to Boaz and her children from that marriage place her in the family line of David. She is his great-grandmother. You might know that she is also named in the genealogy of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew: "And Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth..." (Matthew 1:5, NRSV)

Ruth's decision on the plains of Moab has a clear impact on the story of our faith. That reason provides a satisfying literary explanation, but it is not a very satisfying relational or communal understanding of why Ruth chose to go with Naomi. We are left with a lot of questions. Why does Ruth stay with her mother-in-law? What would compel her to do so? And why in the world does it matter to us now?

Before we attempt to answer those questions, let's take a step back and talk about what is going on with us now. It has been over three months since we started the pause in response to the coronavirus here in New York City. Phase 2 of re-opening is filling us with hope. It is fair to say that we adjusted, as New Yorkers do. Perhaps we grumbled a little, but in fact, we adapted rather quickly to pandemic life. It is normal now to see friends and colleagues in zoom boxes. It is normal to wear masks. We are now agile at juggling our own zoom work and being tech support for our children. We remind each other what day it is. We're used to seeing children, significant others, and pets wonder into meetings. Our minds are filled with decisions about whether to stay in the city or not, temporarily and permanently. It is fair also to say that we are tired of it all now. We long to be back to restaurants, going out with friends, using public transportation without overthinking every move we make. But things are not yet normal.

But we don't just come to Ruth and Naomi's story with the coronavirus pandemic on our minds. We come with the deep self-reflection necessitated by witnessing again the horrors and suffering caused by racism, this time we watched from the stillness of our lives in the pause. Anger, confusion and sadness fill us, and we hear the hurt of our black and brown neighbors, neighbors who are also our pewmates in real life and in virtual church. We can't fully understand what it is to walk in their shoes. We hold the tension of urgency and the importance of understanding the long-term commitment that is needed to truly make an impact on racism. Some of us have been marching, some reading, all of us have been praying and seeking where our call is in this movement. We can't help but think of Black trans folks who helped spark the protests around Stonewall, and who are as vulnerable as ever today. We are teaching ourselves to be more comfortable with discomfort and those of us who are white are learning when to use our voices to speak up and when to listen. We aren't getting right all of the time.

We come to Ruth and Naomi's story this Pride weekend, not in anticipation of a wonderful, long day of serving water to marchers along Fifth avenue. It is our memories rather

than our present moment that holds the thump of the base from floats all the way on 14th street, and the constant hum of anticipation of who would come next – Dykes on Bikes, the balloon arches, the Lesbian and Gay Big Apple Marching Band, Stonewall Veterans...the staff was sharing how much they like seeing the queer diaspora groups from around New York City, groups from Russia, South Asia, the Caribbean and how the costumes and music add to the energy of the day. There are also all the community groups – as Nicole put it – the “chosen family” of marching bands, choirs, sports leagues, and so forth. There are activist groups who bring such creativity to their messages, the puppets, the veils, the ways of reminding us amidst the joy what is at stake and sometimes what is lost. We remember the ache of our arms the next days from carrying trays of water and lifting bags of trash collected from the marchers. We remember the being water-logged from the waist down sitting behind the table filling cups from the water dispensers. We remember the year the Rev. Jim Speer’s photo was in the New York Times serving water to the marchers. We remember how it was not easy to get this project started many years ago when it was the Presbytery housed in the south wing who ran the hose from the building to fill the water jugs. We remember finally seeing the end of the march last year on World Pride at 11:45pm and practically collapsing with joy after almost twelve hours of serving water. We remember today with a mix of emotions, sadness that we are not together in those ways but joy for the memories we have that bring Fifth Avenue closer to us this morning.

So, here we are, hearing Ruth and Naomi’s story, wondering about their decisions, wondering about our own decisions in these days. The world seems a mess of contradictions, even more so than usual. The Supreme Court affirmed that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 applies to discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, yet recent changes made to the Affordable Care Act, make transgender patients more vulnerable in another of life’s most intimate settings - healthcare. We often second guess ourselves and have trouble finding the stillness to know our own hearts. There is a cacophony of opinions if that is what you seek. There is no clear line marking the way, and we are not all of one mind about what that way forward is.

The more I read Ruth and Naomi’s story, the more I wondered if the spiritual tools they offer have to do with discerning and deciding more than supporting a genealogy. For instance, there’s another piece of Ruth’s story that might go unnoticed. It is possible that, as Old Testament scholar Michael Coogan suggests, David’s ancestry tied to Moab was a bit of an embarrassment. You see there’s a stipulation in Deuteronomy 23:3 that “no...Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord...to the tenth generation.” Ruth as the “model proselyte” and Naomi’s ties to the family, helps to soften this embarrassment.¹ I can’t help but wonder if something stronger isn’t happening here. In many ways, Ruth is redrawing the lines of the neighborhood. She’s challenging thinking about who is inside and who is outside the bounds of Judah’s community. It seems likely that this welcome, or lack thereof, might be part of what is silently transpiring between the two women when Naomi urges her to go back to Moab and Ruth clings to her.

My friend and pastoral colleague Charles Watterson preached a sermon last fall for the Metro Association of the United Church of Christ that speaks to this type of neighborhood reshaping. He says:

Beloved there is another aspect of our moral and social responsibility which is just as compelling. It seeks to tear down unjust conditions and build ANEW instead of patching things up. WE have no time to patch things up, but it is time for us to tear down unjust conditions and build a new... The questions was raised WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR? It is not enough for us to say

it's those who are in my community. It is time for us to move to a greater and deeper work and look at the conditions of our unconditional love and say my neighbor is the one that is in need. It is not enough to help them for the moment, but it is time we use our ability, our influence to be like our Elder brother Jesus the Christ, known to many as the rebel and effect change.

It is time to change policy, get uncomfortable, dust off your protesting hats, it's time to take out your pen, it is time to send emails, it's time to set your course on to new assignments. Your neighborhood is bigger than you have ever imagined.

Ruth does not have time to labor over her decision about where or not to go with Naomi. She has to decide who is her neighbor and how she is willing to reshape the boundaries of personal and communal relationships. Their relationship has implications for Judah, for Moab, for the lines of their neighborhood. Ruth's decision to go with Naomi is radical in a number of different ways. Like we do today, Ruth and Naomi sit at intersections. Pride has always pushed us to examine the intersections. Ruth's decision to return with Naomi to Judah is not one dimensional. Her decision is economic, political, communal and personal. Yet in that moment, with all the grief surrounding them, with all the sadness, with all the tears, with being emotionally wrung up clinging to Naomi, Ruth makes a decision that changes things when she declares:

"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.

These are words of conviction. They are not ambiguous about Ruth's intent. They do not leave open the door of debate. Discussion, yes. Debate, no. They do not allow any room for doubt to squeeze in, for bitterness to thrive. It is a decision with consequences. It is also a decision made out of love. It is a decision that reaffirms God's love for Naomi.

If Naomi is bitter, if Naomi is sure God has turned against her, Ruth is equally sure that God is with them. Ruth is sure that Naomi's God – present or abandoned – is her God, and that God is holding their relationship accountable. If we read this story as a simple narrative to fill in the family tree of David, Ruth's decision may not seem like that big of deal. If we read this story as a story that teaches about the possibilities of redrawing lines of relationships and community, Ruth's decision matters a whole lot. Because you see, Ruth wasn't making a simple decision in normal circumstances. Ruth was making an extraordinary decision in unprecedented times.

I don't want you to think this was an easy decision. The story wants us to hear the weeping, the story wants us to feel Naomi's despair. The story wants us to imagine Ruth clinging to Naomi, as if her very life depended on this decision. Because her life did depend on it. She was at a crossroad, an crossroad that maybe you feel you are at, even if you don't want to be.

Ruth's spiritual ability in that moment to know her heart and decide, is the moment we need to seize. Something in her allows her to see through the curtain of grief, to pull back to rawness of her husband's death, her sister-in-law's departure and to feel plainly her need in relation to Naomi. Her need in relation to God. Her own need to stay with her mother-in-law. Her own need that frees her to leave Moab behind. Her voice is so powerful here because her affirmation of Naomi so clearly tells who she is who she is connected to. Her questions are one that we know well. Who does she want to be? And who does she want surrounding her in her life? Who is her God? They are the questions for our time as well.

I recently read a book of short stories called *Exhalation* by Ted Chiang that creatively addressed a number of theological ideas in the genre of science fiction. One of the stories called, “Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom,” explores the entanglements of free will. Rather than summarize the story, I want to share a note that Chiang provided at the end of the book:

In discussion about free will, a lot of people say that for an action of yours to be freely chosen – for you to bear moral responsibility for that action – you must have had the ability to do something else under exactly the same circumstances. Philosophers have argued endlessly about what exactly this means. Some have pointed out that when Martin Luther defended his actions to the church in 1521, he reportedly said, “Here I stand, I can do no other,” i.e., he couldn’t have done anything else. But does that mean we shouldn’t give Luther credit for his actions? Surely we don’t think he would have been worthier of praise if he had said, “I could have gone either way.”²

Ruth is *not* spiritually inspiring to us because she could have gone either way. Ruth is captivating to us because she brings clarity to bear on a confusing, chaotic, heart-wrenching situation. Sound familiar? We may not all have the clarity of Ruth in this moment, but it is something to know that she is part of our discipleship story. She teaches us on this Pride Sunday that even if we are confused, even if we are grieving, there is clarity in the deciding, “where you go, I will go...”

¹ Coogan, Michael D. 2012. A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament, Second Edition. (Oxford University Press: New York), p. 190-191.

² Chiang, Ted. 2019. Exhalation. (Knopf: New York), notes on “Anxiety is the Dizziness of Freedom.”