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Ruth 1:1-18
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The Whole People of God

The book of Ruth is among the most moving stories in all of scripture. It is full of sorrow and joy, of faithfulness and deception and love. It is a story of how enemies become friends, and the unexpected ways God works to bring about salvation for the whole people of God. The story opens with these sad lines:

“In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land; and Elimelech, a man of Bethlehem in Judah, with his wife and two sons went to reside in the country of Moab... Elimelech, Naomi’s husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. They married Moabite women....and then the two sons also died.”

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. Throughout the history of civilization up until our very day, patterns of hunger have always been driving human migration. Famine hits. People get hungry. They leave their homes, the places they love, and go out in search of food, jobs, and a better life. Elimelech has taken his family from Bethlehem, which, in a painful bit of irony, means “the place of bread,” to Moab, modern-day Jordan, the land of the enemy Moabites, because there is no bread in Bethlehem. The story turns quickly once the family reaches Moab. Elimelech dies and the two sons, breaking with Israelite tradition marry Moabites, women of another religion and race, Ruth and Orpah. But it is not long before the sons also die, and now three women are left with three dead husbands and no means of support.

The tragedy is almost too much for Naomi. She has lost her husband and her two sons, and with them she has lost any station she may have had in life. She is an old widow woman with no future and two daughters-in-law who don’t look like her or believe in the same god that she does. She will even change her name from Naomi which means “sweet” to Mara which means “bitter.” Naomi has every reason to be bitter and so she turns to go back to Bethlehem, the place of no bread, presumably so she can die in her homeland. She tells her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab. They are young women, she says. They will marry again; they will have children. They will go on to live happy lives. They should not stay with a bitter old woman who has no future. Orpah listens and says a tearful goodbye to her mother-in-law, but Ruth refuses to go. Ruth, a Moabite, an enemy of Israel, is teaching bitter Naomi about the faithfulness of God. “Where you go, I will go,” says Ruth, and launches in to one of the most stirring passages in all of scripture. So often we hear these words read at weddings, a historical context that is completely out of place, but a context in which the spirit of the language is right on. Ruth’s decision to stay with Naomi is based on commitment, loyalty, and love. It is a touching moment, a beautiful moment, and as we will discover, the story of God in salvation history turns on Ruth’s faithfulness and these poetic words.

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Perhaps the best way to receive these words is through music. It is a glorious piece, a beautiful exchange between Ruth and Naomi, and I want to suggest that in these lines and throughout the story of Ruth we see the extravagant hospitality of God, the story of God who is constantly opening the way of salvation, who is turning enemies into friends, and transforming strangers and foreigners into members of the family of God. (By the way, I talked to Dean Wells yesterday and he said, since he is a foreigner after all, he would be glad to sing this piece to you all from the pulpit during his next sermon.)

On Friday night, Abby and I went to church at the First Calvary Baptist Church in the West End of Durham. Now I don't normally like to use the words "Church and Friday Night" in the same sentence. First Calvary Baptist Church, a vibrant congregation in the West End of Durham, was honoring their pastor, Frederick Davis, for 15 years of ministry at the church. The guest speaker was Dr. Joseph Roberts who served as pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta for 30 years, the church that raised Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. Roberts in fact followed Martin Luther King, Sr. as pastor of Ebenezer church.

Dr. Roberts said the story of God is a story of how God moves people from hostility to hospitality, a powerful sentiment for an older African-American man who grew up in the American south. The story of Dr. Roberts' life was shaped by a place that was not hospitable to him, and yet he said our call as Christians is to reflect the radical hospitality of God.

One of the issues we are facing in Durham and indeed across the country, is the issue of immigration. It is at the heart of the book of Ruth, which after all, is a story about immigrants. In the build up to last week's election there was much debate about immigrants. Some politicians said, "We do not have room for immigrants. They must stay home in their own country less they take jobs from Americans." Other politicians said, "It is fine for immigrants to come, because after all they are good producers who prop up the economy."

Fundamentally, immigrants are not job stealers and they are not simply producers who prop up the economy. Immigrants are human beings created in the image of God. It's so easy for us to think of immigration as a political issue as an issue for Republicans and Democrats to hash out in the voting booths. But doesn't God look at immigration, not as a political issue, but as a human issue, as a question of hospitality? Isn't the church called by Jesus to be that community who welcomes the foreigner and the immigrant? If we read the book of Ruth correctly, isn't there some sense in which it is the outsider, the immigrant, Ruth, who is the one to teach us about the faithfulness of God and the hospitality of God?

A few years ago, the Congregation at Duke Chapel welcomed an immigrant family into our midst, a Montegnard family from the mountains of Vietnam who had come to Durham, like Elimelech and Naomi going to Moab, or Ruth and Naomi on the road to Israel, looking for a better life. Members of the Congregation extended the hospitality of Christ by providing food and lodging, and helped the Montegnard family navigate social services, and the transportation system and find child care, and secure jobs. The family had a baby and Nancy baptized that child into the Body of Christ at Duke Chapel. Another Montegnard family lives in a habitat home in the West End of Durham, a mile and half from the Chapel steps and a block away from First Calvary

church where Dr. Roberts preached Friday night and said we as Christians are called to enact God's hospitality to the stranger, and model the embracing arms of Jesus.

Sometimes it takes someone who is different from us, from a different place, perhaps a different race, maybe even a different religion, like Ruth and Orpah, to model this hospitality. A few weeks back, my wife Abby, our community minister, went to visit the Montegnard family in the West End and that family told Abby so many good things about being in Durham, and grateful they are for the support they have received from the Congregation and other places, and yet they said it is also so very hard. Where they are from in Vietnam, nobody has anything, and yet when someone is in need and asks for help people simply give what they have out of their poverty. Sometimes amongst those who have the least there is an extravagant generosity, like the widow in Mark's Gospel who has nothing and yet gives everything and thus embodies the hospitality of Christ who gave everything that we may live abundantly. Shouldn't it be in the places in our lives where there is great abundance, our generosity should be all the more extravagant. And when we are not generous to the outsider, doesn't it mean that in fact we are the ones who have become impoverished, because the resident and the immigrant rather than reflecting the whole people of God remain strangers to one another, and this must break God's heart. Isn't there some sense in which each and every one of us is an immigrant, pilgrims in a foreign land, seeking our home in Christ. One thing we know, citizenship in the kingdom of God and membership in Christ's Church is not dependant on a passport.

The story of Ruth begins in despair and ends in hope. After Ruth's pledge of faithfulness to Naomi, the two women go back to Israel. Under Naomi's wise council Ruth gets married to Boaz, and Ruth gives birth to a son who in turn would become the father of David who would go on to become Israel's greatest King, the grandson of Ruth, the foreigner from Moab. And from the house of David, Jesus, the fullness of God's hospitality would be born in the place of bread, Bethlehem, where the world's deep hunger would give birth to the bread of life, the savior of the world, the ancestor of an immigrant named Ruth.

Amen.