

“Wisdom From the Margins: Ruth, part two”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for July 8th 2018 (7th Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Ruth 2: 1-13

Let's begin by reviewing the plot of this lovely book, the book *Ruth*: the book we began to crack open last Sunday. If you were here for that time of worship, you will recall that Naomi—a Judean woman who had resettled in Moab with her husband during a time of famine in Judah—Naomi had now returned to Judah with one of her daughters-in-law. The reason for their return, alas, was not only because the famine in Judah had now ended, but because Naomi's husband as well as both of her sons had died. Naomi was able to persuade one of her daughters-in-law, a woman named Orpah, to return to her own family. The other daughter-in-law, Ruth could not be persuaded: and so Naomi, along with this stubbornly loyal Moabite woman made the journey back to Naomi's homeland: no doubt facing significant challenges and dangers as they journeyed, these two women with no male protection as they travelled.

And yes: that's my way of signalling the fact that the story of Ruth is exceptional for its being a Biblical story that takes, as its focus, the lives of women. The only other book that comes to mind with a similar emphasis just happens to be the book with which we will conclude our journey through these five marginal Biblical books: namely the book *Esther*. I suspect it is not at all surprising that both books are to be found not at the centre, but at the margins of the Biblical canon. In the case of the story of Ruth, it is not only her status as a foreigner, as a Moabite that is of interest to us; it is also quite specifically her identity as a woman: a facet of her identity (and of Naomi's identity) that is woven deeply into the very fabric of this book. Indeed!

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As soon as they arrive back in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem, the depth of the challenge Ruth and Naomi face becomes abundantly clear. It is not merely the fact that these two women return to an agrarian society in which land is pretty much the sole means and the sole measure of wealth. It is also the fact that land, in this patriarchal society, is linked to the male line: meaning that Naomi is no longer in possession of the portion of land that would rightly have been available to her had she been returning to Bethlehem with her husband or one of her two sons. Because all three of them had predeceased her, she and Ruth are landless and therefore desperately impoverished. And let's recall the profound difference between the culture we pretty much take for granted, and the reality to which they would have returned. You can take it as a given that Ruth, the morning after they arrived in Bethlehem, did not go door-to-door to see if any of the downtown businesses needed a sales-clerk. And yes: you can take it as a given that Naomi—while Ruth went out looking for work—did not grab her Yellow Pages to see if there was a local business academy where Ruth could brush up her secretarial skills. Those kinds of options were not available; this was a desperate situation facing

these two desperate women. And so they did what they could...and here's the two pronged strategy Ruth and Naomi mapped out for themselves.

First: steeped as they both appear to have been in the religious customs of the Hebrew people, they are clearly aware of one of the most beautiful of all of the laws found in the Torah, the five books of Moses. And yes, I realize: if you are anything like me, some of the Biblical laws leave you scratching your head and wondering, why! However: there are also times when you read one of the 613 commandments...that's right, according to Jewish tradition there are 613 of them...there are times you read one and think: "Wow! That's lovely". And yes, the 19th chapter of Leviticus states...

...remember what I said earlier, about this being an agrarian society in which land and agriculture are pretty much the sole source of wealth and status...

...the 19th chapter of Leviticus states, and the 23rd chapter of Leviticus reiterates that: *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God.*

Impressive, isn't it: a law stipulating that you will intentionally leave something of your harvest in the field so that the poor and the sojourner can benefit from the bounty of your harvest. I wonder what the reaction would be were we to try to pass a law like that in Canada?

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At any rate: the strategy that Naomi and Ruth devise is grounded upon an awareness of that law and that custom. And so Ruth heads out to glean from the fields...but not just any field. Here's the second prong of that two-pronged strategy, based on the fact that these two women...these two landless, homeless, resource-less women...need someone from the clan of Naomi's late husband Elimelech, to serve as their redeemer-protector: in other words, someone to re-insert them into the line of Elimelech so that they can no longer be landless, so that they can no longer be homeless, so that they no longer shall be without resources. And so Ruth sets out to do precisely that. And yes, with that...

With that the real genre of this lovely little book becomes clear. Whatever else we wish to say about the story of Ruth, it most certainly can be classified as a "romantic comedy", although I hasten to add that this "romantic comedy" is hardly exceptional in being able to boast a number of deeply disturbing themes: beginning with the fact that two of the three main characters are in a desperate situation as the curtain rises, both of them widowed, homeless and penniless. Anyone familiar with their Shakespeare should not be surprised at this: even so light-hearted a comedy as "As you like it" begins with all of the main characters having recently been exiled! That's what great comedy does: it depicts the process by which obstacles to life, above all obstacles to romance,

are overcome so that the heroes can embark on their “happily ever-after” lives. And yes: that’s pretty much what happens when Boaz first encounters Ruth gleaning in his fields and is immediately smitten with her.

Here...here I need to acknowledge that, had I given this sermon a subtitle, that subtitle would have read: “Coming to terms with the story of Ruth, in an age of #metoo”. Consider! Consider the fact that the relationship between Boaz and Ruth involves a relationship between an older, powerful man and a younger woman: the very sort of relationship that is so often at the centre of the sorts of allegations that have led to the formation of the “#metoo” movement. Trust me: were I filming the story of Ruth for a contemporary film audience, I would most certainly not be casting Harvey Weinstein or Bill Cosby in the role of Boaz!

In truth. In truth. Seems to me that the writer of *Ruth*...

...would love to think that a woman wrote this four-chapter masterpiece, but we’ll likely never know one way or the other...

...seems to me that the writer of *Ruth* had a pretty good handle on the specific dangers a woman faces in any culture and any society. On the one hand, both Naomi and Boaz explicitly warn Ruth to be careful as she gleanes in Boaz’s fields, not separating herself from the other women, lest she put herself in danger of sexual assault; I suspect that is a warning every woman has been offered at some point in her life. On the other hand, Ruth takes the initiative at every point in the story, with a bit of goading and guidance from Naomi; Boaz, throughout, is depicted as the perfect gentleman. Clearly head-over-heels in love with Ruth, he expresses that love, above all, by demonstrating his desire to help Ruth and Naomi re-establish their lives and reclaim their dignity. Beyond that, he permits Ruth to make the first move: which is precisely what happens, with a bit of prodding and a bit of guidance from Naomi.

And, of course, our inner cynic can look at all of that and think: “romantic comedy! Are you kidding me Foster! This is an economic relationship; this is a business deal; it has nothing whatsoever to do with romance!” To which I would respond...

Well: to which I would respond by saying. “You know, it’s complicated. It’s complicated because life is complicated...and human love, human romance is complicated!” Here’s the thing!

When you read the story of Ruth from start to finish...

...if you haven’t yet, you really should, because it is only four chapters long and it is perfectly lovely...

...when you read the story from start to finish, it's obvious that Boaz is completely and utterly madly in love with Ruth. Ruth, on the other hand...

...with Ruth it's harder to say what she feels about Boaz. It's obvious she is in love with her mother-in-law, for whom she would appear to be willing to walk on glass if need be. Does she have that kind of feeling for Boaz? Is she "really in love with him" as we romantic 21st century types might be inclined to ask? Hard to say! But what might well be said in response is simply this: does that really matter? Is that really important...given the reality Ruth and Naomi face? Does romance need to be at the top of Ruth's agenda? And if it isn't at the top of her agenda, is that necessarily a bad thing?

And I realize...I realize that may sound like a perverse question...but consider. Consider how one of the commentaries I have been consulting for this series on the five Old Testament scrolls, thinks of these five books. This commentary regards each of the scrolls as a garment. Intriguingly, it speaks of *Song of Songs* (the first of the five scrolls), as "the garment of love." But it speaks of this second scroll—it speaks of the book *Ruth*—not in terms of love but in terms of "kindness", referring to *Ruth* as the "garment of **kindness**."

And you know, at the end of the day, I think that gets this story just right. As we'll discover next week, there is a final obstacle that gets in the way of Boaz and Ruth being able to enter into marriage: having to do with the fact that Boaz is technically not the first in line of Elimelech's male relatives who is entitled to act as Naomi and Ruth's redeemer. And yet: Naomi directs Ruth to glean not in that other relative's field, but in Boaz's field. Why? Because she knows him to be a kind man. For his part, Boaz makes it clear to Ruth—from the get-go—that he is drawn to her because of the kindness Ruth has shown to Naomi. Of course, he is an older man charmed by this lovely younger woman; but he also sees her character, he sees her kindness. And as we all eventually discover: in a long-term relationship, kindness is a far more important ingredient than passion, the truly indispensable ingredient in making it possible for love to be sustained over the years and over the decades. The experience of a new love is unparalleled; but at the end of the day, and as the incomparable Jane Austen reveals pretty much in every one of her novels—kindness is what really and truly matters.

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A final thought.

Rarely have I ever preached a sermon in which I have been more certain that—in a certain sense—I have absolutely no idea what in the world I am talking about. I mean that! And I mean that because unlike last Sunday's sermon—in which I considered Ruth as a foreigner and could speak as someone who came to Canada as a foreigner and who also came to the Church of Jesus Christ as an outsider...

...this Sunday I have been speaking of Ruth (and also of Naomi) as women: and where that is concerned, I have no inner experience upon which to draw,

only my experience of being around women for all of my life. While it would be wrong to trivialize the common humanity that we together share, male and female fashioned together in the image of God...it would also be a mistake for me, as a male, to presume that I fully understand the inner dynamics of what it would have been like for Naomi or for Ruth: any more than I would presume to understand the inner dynamics of what it means for Sherry to have put up with me for over thirty years.

And I find it fascinating that the one and only human division that takes place, according to the Biblical account, **prior** to human disobedience in the Garden, is the division between male and female. Division between races doesn't really come until Noah and his wife give birth to three sons; division between language doesn't really begin until after the Tower of Babel; and division between Jew and Gentile doesn't begin until Abraham and Sarah. But the division between male and female starts with God...appears to be part of God's plan for us from the start. Which is to say that we human beings, from the get-go, are destined to need one another...destined to acknowledge that we bring a partial perspective on anything and all things: and need one another...desperately need one another...if we are to see life as it truly is, and if we are to live our lives as they truly ought to be lived.

And yes: while there is no magic formula for any of that, kindness—quite frankly—is an awfully good starting point. The sort of kindness Ruth showed to Naomi. The sort of kindness Boaz showed to Naomi and to Ruth. The simple human kindness through which God's own kindness—the God who fashioned us male and female in the image of God—the simple human kindness through which God's own kindness can shine through...and thereby point us to the things that truly matter.

May it be so! Amen!