

"The Audacity of Ruth"

Ruth 1:1 - 18

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The story of Ruth is one of the great literary gems in our Old Testament and I encourage you to find some time to read through the entire story, this great love story of courage and devotion. Of course, not right now! Read it later today or later this week when you have a few minutes.

We don't have time to hear the entire story this morning here it is in summary. Ruth makes the bold decision to leave her own country, her own people, her own land and to journey with her mother-in-law over into this foreign land where she has no home or identity, knowing all of the trials and tribulations that is she is likely to face as an outsider in that community. Yet, in doing so, through acts of both compassion and boldness, she ends up marrying a local man, bearing a son and becoming one of the critical links in the chain of ancestry that leads right through Kings David and Solomon and all the way up through the Gospel of Matthew to the very lineage of Jesus Christ himself. It is an amazing story and yet none of the story would have been possible if it had not been for the crucial decision that Ruth makes right at the beginning. Now it may not seem to us, having read the rest of the story and knowing how it plays out, such a remarkable decision, but it is.

In ancient cultures, as is still true in many cultures today, a woman's identity, a woman's security, was entirely bound up within the household of her nearest male relative. Growing up, it would have been her father, and then she would be moved into the household of her husband, and if she were to outlive her husband, then her security, her identity, would have been with her next nearest male relative, perhaps her oldest son, or the brother of her husband, whoever was nearest to her. All of her own identity, all of her property, all of her security, everything about her was bound up within the household of her nearest male relative.

As we read at the beginning of the story we find not only Naomi, but all three of these women in the most desperate and vulnerable position that a woman could have been in for their time. Naomi had lost her husband and her sons and she has no male relative left in Moab. The only hope that she has, in fact, the only hope that all three of them have is to return to their homelands, to their own kin, their own people, their own households of origin in order that they might have the possibility of reclaiming the link with a male relative and once again find a place within society. That is their only hope. So Naomi begins to make the journey back to her homeland. We are not exactly sure why, maybe she thinks that Orpah and Ruth are simply accompanying her to the border to see her off, but at some point along the journey, she realizes that they are about to

come all the way back with her and she knows what a dangerous situation that would place them in. Not only to be vulnerable as single women, but also to be foreigners in a strange land, that was incomprehensible to Naomi and so she says to them, “please, my daughters-in-law, do not come with me”. She begs them, she pleads with them to return to their own kin. So Orpah does what is the right thing to do, what is the sensible thing to do. We may give her a bad rap, because we’ve read the rest of the story, but in that moment she actually does what is the most logical thing – she agrees to abide by the pleads of her mother-in-law and she goes back to her own people, her only chance of security. Yet, Ruth makes this startling decision, this audacious decision against common practice, against tradition, against common sense; she makes the decision to travel with her mother-in-law to this foreign land. It is only because she makes this decision that the rest of the story is set so that it can play out – the great love story that is Ruth and Boaz, and the great ancestry to King David and even to Jesus Christ.

Yet, I wonder why, why would Ruth make that decision? Why would she go against common practice, against common sense and travel with her mother-in-law. What possible motivation could there have been for her?

Dr. Julie Galambush was here last weekend and in her presentations to us, she was reminding us that in the Book of Ruth may have been placed in the Old Testament to be juxtaposed with the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. If you do not remember that portion of our journey through the Bible earlier this year, let me remind you that those books highlight the need for religious and cultural purity. They are books in which the people of Israel are in essence are trying to purify themselves, to be as holy as possible, and one of the ways that they do that is by trying to get rid of all of the foreigners. In the Book of Ezra, there are specific laws that command men not to take foreign women as wives and women not to take foreign men as husbands. That may be the very setting into which Ruth is walking, not only a foreign situation, but a hostile foreign situation. Yet, she makes the decision in the face of it all to travel with Naomi to Judah.

This last week I saw several interviews with Bill Bishop. Bill Bishop is a journalist from Austin, Texas, who has written a new book, and who is on a book tour, so you may run across him on the TV or in the newspaper. The book is entitled *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart*. Bill’s thesis is this: Over the last thirty years, for a variety of reasons, there has been an increasing homogenization of American communities – that people have increasingly sorted themselves out in this “big sort” to live in narrower and narrower communities of like-

mindedness. His theory is that it is partly because of the fact that with a certain amount of affluence and a certain amount of choices that are presented to us, it is much more possible to live in more and more like-minded communities. He also theorizes that because our country as a whole has become increasingly multicultural and multilingual and multiethnic that whether consciously or unconsciously people have begun to try to find a little more security in their own identity and so have sifted themselves out in slightly more and more homogenous communities.

Now I confess I have only read a portion of Bill's book before this morning and so I do not know if I agree with his thesis or not, but his argument is certainly a challenging one. As I begin to reflect on things that I see anecdotally in our culture, I am aware that people do in fact live in a society now where it is possible to be more and more homogenous, to have more and more choice about like-mindedness. For example, despite the enormous variety of churches that exist in America today, even Christian churches, even Protestant Christian churches, even mainline Protestant Christian churches, even Reformed Protestant Christian churches, even Presbyterian Reformed Protestant Christian churches, there are still a wide variety of choices that a person can make to find their exact band on the theological spectrum and so surround themselves with people who think and act and worship and pray and read exactly as they do.

We can find a church that is full of people who will always affirm exactly what we believe. We can find a news media outlet that is full of people who will always affirm exactly what we believe. Bill Bishop's premise is that we can also sort ourselves out even into a neighborhood surrounded by neighbors of people who believe and act and think and have a lifestyle that is exactly like ours.

I began to reflect on my own life this week and realized as I began to take a count of my friends, my colleagues, the people that I spend the most time with, that I have often made those choices to surround myself with like-minded people. On the other hand, I have been fortunate in my life honestly to stumble into a few decisions in which I was able to surround myself with people a bit differently than I. When I made the decision to attend Seminary, I visited about a half dozen of our seminaries across the country and at many of them the situation was the same. It was crystallized in one particular visit to a seminary on the East Coast. I stepped outside the chapel during my tour of the campus and along the hallway was a long line of framed pictures of the graduating classes and as I walked down the hallway looking at those pictures, I discovered that almost every picture looked exactly like me. I knew, because I had lived in communities around the

world in mission service, that it was going to be important for me to study in a place where I could be surrounded by people who would challenge the things that I thought. So, I made the decision to go to McCormick Seminary here in Chicago, a seminary that members of this church, I am proud to say, were responsible for founding. It is a seminary where more than half of the student body is racial ethnic—not white—where more than half of the student body is not Presbyterian. That was important to me. In my graduating class of thirty-two students in the Master’s program, only four were white men. It was an opportunity, and as it turns out now looking back, a rare opportunity in my life, to surround myself with people who did not think and read the Bible just like I did. That was very formational for me in forming and strengthening my own values for ministry.

Here in our congregation, we also have the opportunity to surround ourselves and to learn from people who are not quite like us, I am proud to say. Last weekend, Dr. Julie Galambush came and presented a series of lectures over the weekend and was here in worship with us. You may have noticed from her biography that although she began her faith journey as an American Baptist, she is a convert to Judaism. In the week before Julie’s lectures, I got phone call from someone in the community who had received a flyer in the mail about Julie’s lectures. He was upset. He said to me, “Do I understand that you have someone coming to your church this weekend that is Jewish?” I said, “Well, that’s my understanding, yes.” He said, “So let me get this right, you’re having someone give a lecture who has rejected Christ as her personal Lord and Savior, is that right?” I said, “Well, I’m not sure that she would put it that way, but you might want to come ask her yourself. I don’t personally know Julie, but what I do personally know is this: I am strong enough in my faith that I can invite someone with whom I disagree to come share their own beliefs, their own theology, their own way of seeing the world and the world of faith. I can learn from that person and grow from the experience of having heard her perspective and that’s not going to dilute or make my faith any more fragile. It is going to strengthen my faith.” To which I received a loud “Harrumph!” on the other end of the phone. I don’t know if he came or not, but I was proud that we had Dr. Galambush here. I was proud that we live in a community where we can hear voices of people that are not quite like us. And yet...and yet, while there are those rare moments in my life when I can pat myself on the back, I am still all too aware that it is tempting, it is easy, perhaps it is even part of my biological wiring, to surround myself with people who mostly look and act and think and live just like I do. There is a certain comfort in that. Birds of a feather after all, do flock together.

Is that wrong? What do we miss out on if we do in fact surround ourselves with sameness? I return to the story of Ruth who makes this bold decision to step out of her own identity, but I also consider that another part of the story is the people of Judea, who receive Ruth into their community. Yes, some with suspicion and prejudice, that's to be sure in the rest of the story, and yet some who are willing to receive her, a Moabite woman - one man who is even so daring as to marry her so that she may become a part of their community. In considering the people of Judea, what might be the challenges for us this morning? Why might we, in particular, as a community of faith, be challenged to consider how this question about crossing identity and boundaries might impact us? Now in terms of the inherent dangers of intolerance that might come from grouping with like-minded people around politics or social norms or other issues, I will let you think through that for yourselves, but this morning I specifically want to think about what it might mean for us as a body of Christ—as part of this community of faith together.

After all, when we read the Gospel of John, we find Jesus praying—not that the disciples might adopt some great evangelistic tool, not that they might have a brilliant church growth strategy, not that they might have democratic practices of church polity. Instead, what Jesus prays on behalf of his disciples is that they might be “one”, so that the world might see and believe.

In Jesus' ministry he pushed his disciples to think about how they might include people like the Good Samaritan and other Gentiles into their community of faith. He challenged them to cross boundaries. In the life of the early church that we have spent many of the last several weeks exploring, we find the disciples in the Acts of the Apostles wrestling again and again with what it means to include Gentiles in the community of faith. What are the markers of identity that provide a foundation for us? They are stretched over and over in order to expand the tent. So it seems as a community of faith in particular that there is a call from the very beginning of Jesus' ministry to think about how we might include those who are different from ourselves and even how we might be willing to cross boundaries so that we might be in relationship with people do not quite look and think and act like us.

How would it affect the way we do mission in North Chicago as well as around the world if, rather than others being simply the recipients of our gift, we were in deep relationship with people to the extent that we were transformed by the relationship? That we saw in them a little bit of the divine that we had not seen in ourselves, or in our

own community, if we were stretched and expanded in our faith, if we were deepened in our faith, through profound relationships with people near and far. How would it change the way we think about our faith and live out our faith in mission? How might it change the way that we worship together on Sunday morning if we wanted to create a hospitable community in which the foreigner felt welcome? Not just to become just like us, but felt like this was a community where he or she could come and bring their own perspectives, their own songs and stories and worship right here in the midst of us. If we were that kind of welcoming, hospitable community, how might that shape us, how might it transform us? Even in our personal lives and our personal relationships if we were willing to step outside of our comfort zones and security, in a deep relationship with people who are profoundly different from us, how might we be challenged, deepened, stretched, how might we live out our faith differently, how might we even pray differently, even read the Bible differently because of those relationships?

This morning, both the Amen conclusion to our sermon and our invitation to the table are contained in our hymn of response, “Walls Mark Our Boundaries.”

WALLS MARK OUR BOUNDARIES

Jim Stratthdee

1. Walls mark our boundaries and keep us apart;
walls keep the world from our eyes and our heart.
Tables are round, making room for one more,
welcoming friends we had not known before.

Refrain

So build us a table and tear down the wall!
Christ is our host. There is room for us all!

2. Walls make us sure who is in and who's out;
walls keep us safe from all question and doubt,
but at a table in open exchange
new ties are formed as our lives rearrange.
3. Once we were strangers, divided, alone.
Hate and distrust built a wall stone by stone.
Now at a table the bread that we share
joins us to Christ in a circle of care.