

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

Hebrews 9:24-28

Under the old Lectionary, we never read from the book of Ruth. The old Lectionary chose the Old Testament reading for its thematic link to the Gospel reading for the day. The new Lectionary is different, which is both good and bad. We get to hear stories that we haven't heard before in church, but most times, there isn't a coherent theme. I like getting to talk about some of these Old Testament stories that might otherwise be relegated to children's Sunday School lessons and then forgotten. The story of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz is one such story. Because we observed All Saints last Sunday, we missed the intro to Ruth. Allow me catch you up.

Because of a famine in Judah, Naomi's husband took her and their sons to Moab where there was food. The sons grew up and married Moabite women. Then, after a few years, the father and both sons died. Naomi heard that the famine was over back home, so she headed out. She told her daughters-in-law that they could go back to their families and seek new husbands, because she wasn't going to have any more sons. Orpah chose to return home, but Ruth pledged to stay with Naomi. "Where you go, I go; where you live, I will live. Your people are my people, your God is my God; where you die, I'll die, and that's where I will be buried."

That last bit is often read at non-Episcopal weddings. We don't use it because it has nothing to do with marriage. It is a bit incongruous that churches that would never hold a same-sex wedding would use a passage of commitment between two women as a model for a marriage. I guess that is what happens when one takes scripture out of context. The real scandal here is the fact that Ruth is a Moabite. The Moabites were descendants of Moab. Moab was the son that resulted from one of Lot's daughters getting him drunk and sleeping with him so she could have a child. This was after God had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, supposedly for their sexual immorality. Good thing the righteous family was saved. At any rate, Judeans did not take kindly to Moabites.

But in Ruth, they saw someone special. She adored her mother-in-law, which went a long way with Naomi's family. She went to gather grain from the field as the men were harvesting. The owner of the field, Boaz, took note of her and ordered his men not only to leave her alone, but also to leave some of the better grain for her to collect. It is upon hearing about this that Naomi realized that Boaz might be husband potential for her daughter-in-law. The result is today's reading.

So Boaz and Ruth get married and live happily ever after. It's a nice story. It's a good story of honest, righteous people who treat one another justly and fairly. There is much grace in the story. But surely there were other stories of nice people behaving well. What makes the story of Ruth important enough to include it in the Hebrew Scriptures, and thus included in our Old Testament canon? It comes down to the last line. "They named [Ruth's son] Obed; he became the father of Jesse,

the father of David.” King David's great-grandmother was a Moabite. Can you imagine? The greatest king in Israel's history was descended from one of those filthy Moabites? Those people are so bad we made up an origin story that uses rape and incest to get the ball rolling. David? Our David? No. Really?

The entire story of Ruth is a reminder not to judge a person by their people. Sure, having groups and preconceived notions about those groups makes life easier. That way you don't have to think about how to treat someone. Oh, they're one of *those*. Well, I feel this way about such people; he is of them; therefore I feel this way about him. Simple, easy, efficient, and oh so wrong. As Christians, we are called to respect the dignity of every human being. They don't have to earn our respect; respect is the default condition. We cannot categorize someone and then dismiss them. Each person is a unique creation of the God and Creator of all. Each person we meet is created in the image and likeness of God. And Christ died for that person just as surely as Christ died for you

So who are the Moabites today? Who are the ones that are different, not from around here, not like us? It is different for each person. Each of us has some group or other that we consider *them*. Whatever we base our groups on – politics, race, religion, gender, orientation, who we root for at football games – whatever grouping system we use, we need to make sure that we still see individuals. Categories are useful, but they don't always reflect reality. In chemistry, we speak of metal and non-metals, but it is not a hard and fast distinction. The properties vary as you move across the periodic table. In biology, we talk about plants and animals, but there are species that blur the line – yeasts for example. We can't even agree about when a planter becomes just a rock. Erica still insists that Pluto is a planet. One thing I always tried to get across to my students was don't confuse the model with reality. Categories and models are useful, but they are not the real thing.

Of course, our reading from Hebrews call into question what we mean by “the real thing.” The tabernacle in the desert was “real”, but it wasn't reality. The real Holy of Holies is the throne of God in God's celestial realm. It is not physical, but it is real. When Christ died, he entered the real sanctuary. His sacrifice was not like the sacrifice of bulls and lambs; his was a perpetual offering of himself. The physical reality that we relate to only points to a deeper spiritual reality. That's what we mean by sacraments, the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace. To borrow from last week's sermon, substance and accidents.

I love the paradox. When we imagine things, we often have to adjust those ideas to fit reality; but the reality is that we can only imagine what is truly real. The physical is transient and passing. The reality of God is infinite and eternal. That which we grasp with our senses can only point to the deeper reality that is. Makes dividing the world up into groups rather meaningless. There is no us and them; there is only we. Even when we think we could have nothing in common with a bunch of Moabites, we realize that our king was descended from them. Even when we think we have all the

categories set, we realize that people are more important than the label we give them. Even when we think we have grasped reality, we realize that the physical can only point to the real.

We need to be prepared for God to change our point of view, shift our paradigms, throw us for a loop. God shakes our foundations so that we may build on an unshakeable one. Putting our faith not in our own ability to make the categories of us and them, but trusting that when our Lord prays that we will all be one, he means it. And will give us the grace to live that out in our lives. That grace, that ability, is ours for the asking. It is our Father's will. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*