

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
November 8, 2009

Bringing the Outcast Home

(I encourage you to read the short Book of Ruth)

On Friday lunchtime I typically go to the Farmer's Market for a bowl of their splendid soup, and in the genial hum of the snack bar's wonderfully European closeness I sit and pour over one of my resources for Sunday's sermon. Often, a conversation ensues with neighbors, and such was yesterday. A spirited lady asked what I was reading. "I'm a pastor," I offered—blissfully, she didn't make a quick exit. I said, "It's a piece on the Book of Ruth for this Sunday's sermon." With refreshing openness she said she wasn't familiar with the book, and asked what it was about, which challenged me in about three seconds, to come up with a summary.

The challenge brought to mind the gauntlet thrown down by Erwin Schrödinger's (the physicist of "Schrödinger's cat" fame), that anything *really* important ought to fit on the back of a postage stamp. So I dove in and offered something like: "It's about a young woman, named Ruth, who's from the despised country of Moab—much like Samaritans were to Jews in Jesus day—who journeys in desperate times with her mother-in-law to Israel, and eventually becomes the great grandmother of Israel's greatest king, David. It's about outcasts being embraced," I added. She looked very reflective for a moment, and then said, with real conviction, "Now there's a lesson for our times." Which made me ponder that our faith is less about giving ourselves hope and confidence than about giving the outcast hope and confidence, a gift that invariably returns to bless us.

Ruth's compact story (it's barely three pages and would take perhaps fifteen minutes; I do *urge* you to read it) begins with a devastating famine in the land of Israel. To survive, one, Naomi, her husband and their two sons leave for despised Moab, where there is at least food to be had. They settle there, and eventually the sons take sweethearts for wives, named Orpah and Ruth. But then the three men die, and the penniless Naomi determines to return home to Bethlehem in Israel. But Naomi, no-doubt sensing the stigma of taking two Moabite daughters-in-law to a deeply prejudicial Israel, insists that they stay behind and find Moabite husbands. Orpah, understandably returns. But Ruth is adamant, and in her memorable speech she insists:

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.
¹⁷Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!

While Ruth embraces Naomi's God—for Naomi's sake—Naomi, by contrast, on arriving back home in Bethlehem after years away, says to her old neighbors, "Do not call me Naomi [that is, "pleasant"], call me Mara, [that is, "bitter"], for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has

brought me back empty.” Which is a great irony in this powerful story because she had in fact left Israel *empty* in the midst of a “great famine,” and now returns very “full,” though she does not yet know what future agent of salvation her companion Ruth will be to her.

While the Book of Ruth is a compelling story, like most of scripture its real power lies behind the surface events. For instance, behind the passage we read from chapter 4, telling of the birth of a son, Obed, to Ruth and Boaz, there are startling circumstances. Obed will become the grandfather of King David, Israel’s greatest king. And from David’s line will emerge none other than Jesus himself. Yet the forebears of Ruth and Boaz are tied to deeply perverse events. Ruth is a Moabite, which people trace their lineage to Abraham’s nephew, Lot. After Lot’s miraculous escape from the blazing cities of the plain, Lot’s two daughters, lamenting that there are no men at all left in the region, get their father drunk and on consecutive nights become pregnant by him. The one gives birth to Edom, the other to Moab, which nations Israel long despised and battled with. Ruth is a Moabite. Her husband, Boaz, meanwhile, is descended from another incestuous relationship between Judah (founder of the most influential of the twelve tribes of Israel), and Judah’s daughter-in-law, Tamar. Tamar, also a foreigner, was essentially abandoned by the family when her three husbands, all Judah’s sons, died successively. All three stories, Lot’s daughters, Tamar’s, and Ruth’s are told with precisely the same sequence of events, which is clearly intentional. Each points to the noble ambition of each woman to fulfill her principal role in life—the continuation of her ancestral line, with a son, at virtually any cost. Each woman is an alien, and essentially an outcast. The point?—the astonishing acceptance of God in using very fallible, sinful people for divine initiatives, even linking to the birth of *our Savior*! As Katherine Robertson Farmer puts it, “Whatever determined David’s eligibility to father the messianic line of kings, we can be sure that it was neither the ethnic nor the moral purity of his ancestral line.”

What determines anything that brings joy and renewal beyond imagining is nothing less than the astonishing grace of God, which is the very heartbeat of the Ruth story. The writers of scripture make no apology, nor do they seek to hide these things, because they offer such compelling evidence about the nature of God who makes no distinction among us.

Empty! That is the only thing on Naomi’s mind as she arrives back in Bethlehem. And it’s understandable after all she’s gone through. After all, a widow in Ruth’s day could inherit nothing on the death of her husband. Everything went to the eldest son. But she has no sons now.

By now the reader of scripture has learned that when people in biblical stories lament the emptiness of their lives, and yet seek to be faithful—even a limping faithfulness, some good lies in hiding.

Remember Abraham,, giving away his wife, Sarah to Pharaoh, who has a lusting eye for her, Abraham all the while pretending that she is ‘merely’ his sister. But God did not discount that against the founder and father of the faith. Or Moses, who murdered a man, and fearing for his own life, fled into the wilderness—where God later encountered him in the burning bush and made him the savior of his people. Or consider Jacob, who stole both the blessing and the birthright from his older brother, Esau, and fled into exile himself for twenty years. Finally facing his return in fear and trembling, here comes the terrifying specter of Esau with a small army kicking up a storm of desert dust, then Esau running headlong at his brother—and throwing himself at Jacob in a massive embrace. The Hebrew slaves, near starving in their trek through the wilderness, muttering anarchy and vengeance on Moses for taking them away from the fleshpots of Egypt. Then comes quail and manna by night, falling out of the desert sky like a holy rain. Or the way virtually every Psalm, no matter what the author’s complaint about enemies and evil men, rises to a high point of praise at the end. Esther, imagining the annihilation of Jewry, suddenly safe by an imperial edict. Saul, breathing murder and terror on the earliest Christians, before becoming Paul the apostle to the gentiles of inestimable faith and courage. All so wrong to think that God has abandoned them, when here comes grace, peeking around the corner just ahead, ready to jump out and startle with delight.

And so God insists on using these, and ordinary mortals like us, to bring forth the redeemer of the world, and to give him a resurrected presence.

Ruth's story reads like a parable of Israel with God. Ruth persists in loving and supporting Naomi despite Naomi's rejection (wanting to send her home), just as Israel, and we, are prone to reject God's steady offer of love and support in the fabric of each day. Ruth is persistent as God is persistent, a God whom Ruth does not appear to know ("you're God," she says to Naomi), yet whom she embodies in extraordinary faithfulness. Robertson Farmer again:

We who consider ourselves the people of God are frequently tempted to think that redemption comes as a reward to those who are faithful. . . . [but it is] God's faithfulness, not our own, [that] brings about redemption. . . . We are recipients of an unmerited love, and our redemption is due to someone else's *hesed* [i.e. loyal kindness and steadfastness], not our own.

Recall we said earlier that our faith is less about giving ourselves hope and confidence than about giving others hope and confidence, especially the outcast.

A Scottish pastor, Archibald Naismith tells a story related to him by a Highland shepherd on his uncle's estate in Aridilly, the facts of which the shepherd, a good Christian man, was quite prepared to vouch for.

On an isolated hillside in the Highlands, a certain widow lived alone. She had learned through faith and experience to rest in God in every difficulty. On this occasion, her poverty had become extreme. It was winter, and her isolation and age compounded her need. Whereas in a story in Elisha (2 Kings) a certain widow found her meager store of oatmeal miraculously replenished each morning, the Highland widow's store failed completely. When she had finished the last handful, she went to bed, perhaps hopeful that she might somehow earn a few pence the next day. But it was not to be so, because in the night a terrific snowstorm isolated her cottage all the more.

In the morning, though travel was impossible, there was one friend, however, to whom she could apply, and in that friend she had the most perfect confidence. So she prayed to him, to Christ. Then she filled her pan with water, added the salt, and said to herself, "I'll go to bed and ask God for the meal."

She had not been on her knees long when a muffled knock came at the door. "No, Lord," she said, "you cannot have sent the answer so soon."

But the knocking continued, and opening the door to a flurry of snow, a neighbor's daughter, who lived some considerable distance from her, flung down a sack of oatmeal on the floor, exclaiming, "Father sent this to you. Whatever possessed my father, I don't know, but all morning he's been hounding me about this sack of meal, and snow or no snow, I had to get it to you. And a hard time I had of it, I can tell you."

The widow lifted her hands, beaming. "He's always the same, Jeannie! Many a long year have I trusted him, and never found him to fail. I put on the water, and I put in the salt, but never an ounce of meal did I have. So I was just asking the Lord to send the meal when I heard your knock at the door."

Amen.