

“Wisdom from the Margins: Ruth, Part One”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for July 1st 2018 (Sixth Sunday after Pentecost/Canada Day)
by Foster Freed

Ruth 1: 1-22

Let's begin...let's begin with a once upon a time story.

Once upon a time...once upon a time there was a man named Lot who, it so happened, was the nephew of our well-known father, father Abraham. Lot and his family made their home in the city of Sodom, a city which was about to be destroyed due to the wickedness of its inhabitants. Being a good man—and being Abraham's nephew—Lot was warned of the danger the city faced, and he was permitted (along with his wife and two daughters) to escape the city. Alas: as they fled, Lot's wife famously takes a glance behind her and is instantly turned into a pillar of salt. With no possibility of helping her, Lot and his daughters continue to make their escape, choosing to settle in isolation, so afraid are they of their neighbors. For their part, his daughters—despairing of their situation—decide that they will perpetuate their father's lineage by getting him drunk and having him impregnate them. And so both daughters bear their father a son: the younger daughter giving birth to a boy she names Ben-Ammi who becomes the founder of one of Ancient Israel's enemy-neighbors, the Ammonites; for her part, the older daughter gives birth to a boy she names Moab who becomes the founder of another of Ancient Israel's enemy-neighbors, the Moabites. Such, in short, is the affection with which Ancient Israel regarded the Ammonites and Moabites, that they saw them as the incestuous offspring of Lot and his daughters. Therein ends our once upon a time story, but therein also...

...therein also is to be found a perfect starting point for our consideration of the book named after its Moabite heroine: a woman named Ruth. To be fair, there are many headings under which we might ponder the book named after Ruth. That she was a woman is far from incidental to Ruth's story; hopefully we'll have a chance to consider that next Sunday. Nor is the fact that she is both a daughter and a mother incidental to the story of Ruth; hopefully we'll have a chance to ponder that two Sundays from now. But Ruth, first and foremost, needs to be understood as a foreigner, and not just any foreigner, but a Moabite: a nation which far too often had proven itself to be the enemy, a nation therefore to be regarded with that awful combination of fear and contempt that we human beings tend to reserve for our most despised enemies. But before I go any further....

...please recall that I am hoping to ponder—this summer—five small Old Testament books, books which are generally grouped together in the Jewish way of ordering the Bible. In contrast, these same books tend to be scattered through the Christian Bible. Although the precise location of the book *Ruth* has varied somewhat, for the most part it's safe to generalize that Jews place *Ruth* right after *Song of Songs*, the second of the five scrolls. For our part, Christian Bibles almost universally place the

book in the Bible's history section, wedged between Judges and 1st Samuel which, of course, is entirely appropriate given that the story is set during the time of the Judges. That does of course, raise the question: what kind of book is this, anyway? Is it a short-story, a fictional work set in a particularly rich historical time and place? Or is it a work of history? We are unlikely ever to resolve that question which, I suspect, does not really affect how we read the book. On the one hand, *Ruth* is a remarkable piece of literature, one of the earliest examples of the Hebraic genius for the short-story form; on the other hand, the fact that Ruth is depicted as the grandmother of King David makes it hard to imagine that the key facets of the story are entirely fictional.

At any rate: it is Ruth's identity as a Moabite—a foreigner, an outsider—that gives this book much of its energy. Recall that her story begins when a famine draws a man by the name of Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons, out of the land of Israel, into the land of Moab. While there, Elimelech dies, leaving his widow and their two sons, both married to Moabite women. But then the sons also die: leaving Naomi and her two daughters-in-law in dire circumstances. Naomi eventually decides that she has no viable choice but to return home. At first both of her daughters-in-law follow her. Eventually her appeals to common sense move the first daughter-in-law, Orpah, to return to her own people. But nothing Naomi can do or say can dissuade Ruth from her determination to follow Naomi back home. And that she does; in the weighty words with which Ruth chapter one comes to a close:

So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite...

...our narrator is not going to let us forget that this woman was an outsider, a foreigner, and not just any foreigner but a Moabite...

...so Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabite her daughter-in-law with her, who returned from the country of Moab.

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It is important, whatever else we make of the story of Ruth...

...it is important to recognize that this story takes its place as part of an Old Testament debate—in other words a debate within ancient Israel, a debate within Judaism—concerning the very nature of Jewish identity. Judaism is a fascinating religion, largely because of the way in which Jewish identity incorporates elements of ethnicity as well as elements of religious observance. Like it or not, Jewish experience tended to teach that a significant degree of caution needed to be exercised when attempting to bring those outside the clan into the family of faith. At its extreme, the teachings can seem very harsh. In two of the final history books found in the Old Testament, *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*, there is considerable disapproval directed toward Jewish men who have taken non-Jewish wives, and many of those men choose to abandon those wives. For its part, the highly influential book Deuteronomy admonishes the Israelites to be kind and considerate of the people of Edom

(descendants of Esau) as well as the people of Egypt (where, for better or worse, they had—at least at first—been shown hospitality), but enjoins them to show nothing but contempt for the Ammonites and the Moabites; even to the 10th generation Ammonites and Moabites are not to be given a seat within the sanctuary of Israel's God. That's harsh stuff...and it is impossible to imagine that the book *Ruth* was not created precisely with the intent of—in effect—saying: “Hey guys! Before you get into too much of a huff over these Moabite wives, what about Ruth. You remember Ruth, don't you? King David's grandmother?”

Incidentally: take that as a hint as to how we ought to read our Bibles. Don't believe anyone who tries to convince you that the scriptures—Old **or** New Testament—speak to us in a weary monotone...or scream at us with an angry uniformity of message. Reading the Bible can rightly be compared to having a front-row seat at a gathering of elders: elders who have different perspectives and different priorities. In short, we do ourselves a great disservice if we overlook the places where a book such as *Ruth* (or a book such as *Jonah*) takes a different stance than a book such as *Ezra* or *Nehemiah*. And yes, in much the same way, we do a great disservice if we consider ourselves obliged to pretend that *Mark*, *Matthew* and *Luke* are always in harmony with *John*, or that *Hebrews* is in lock-step agreement with *Paul*. A rich, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional compendium of wisdom: that's how we ought to approach our scriptures. But I digress.

And the bottom line...where the story of *Ruth* is concerned...is that it represents one of the places in our Bible that stress the universality of God's reach: a universality that can even make room for this daughter of Moab, this foreigner, this outsider, this Moabite.

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Well. Were I preaching this sermon on any day other than Canada Day...in fact, were I preaching this sermon on a Canada Day that did not happen to fall in the year of our Lord 2018, I might well be tempted to pretend that there was very little that was relevant in the book *Ruth*, outside of specifically Jewish circles. Alas: contemporary political realities make it impossible for me to attempt that act of make-believe.

And yes: regulars at Trinity over the past five years may well have noticed that I don't preach a whole lot of political sermons...and don't tend even to offer a great many political illustrations Sunday to Sunday. The reasons for my reticence in that regard are many but suffice it to say that I regard the political realm as a profoundly complex realm. While Karl Barth was correct to enjoin us to preach with a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other, making valid connections between the contents of the Bible and the typical contents of a daily newspaper is a far from straightforward process. In short, just because I, for instance, have *Amos*' wonderful words—*let justice roll down like waters*—swirling through my psyche, there is no guarantee that I will be able to identify what justice may or may not demand concerning the complex contemporary issues we face in such areas as health-care, education and yes: our nation's refugee policies.

Make no mistake about it. Ruth was most certainly a refugee; given that she was travelling with her Israelite mother-in-law, she might well be regarded as a “sponsored refugee”. However we choose to label her, it’s hard to pretend that there is no analogy between Ruth and the situation facing many of those—mainly from southern regions—who are creating significant challenges for many of the nations of Europe as well as both Canada and the United States.

And it is important for us as Canadians to focus, I think, upon our Canadian context rather than to hide behind the notion that these are new problems and new challenges that didn’t exist until Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. Even had Trump never been elected—even had he never been born—Europe and North America would presently be dealing with an influx of refugee claimants seeking refuge in cities such as Stockholm and Berlin, Montreal and Toronto. And the question with which we are all wrestling is simply this: to what is the outsider entitled? What precisely do we owe those who come to us from difficult, if not dire, circumstances? And what light, if any, can the story of an outsider—a refugee such as Ruth—what light can Ruth’s story shed on our contemporary deliberations?

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Remember what I said earlier...what I said earlier about the care which ought to be taken when we make the move from ancient text to contemporary reality. That certainly applies to our use of *Ruth* in the context of current debates vis a vis immigrants and refugees. Whatever else we need to say about this book, we dare not ignore its potent reminder that we are all human beings, regardless of race, colour and creed: and deserve to be treated as human beings. “In Christ there is, indeed, no east or west; in him, no south or north; but one great family of love; throughout the whole wide earth.” The message of Ruth—the story of the Moabite woman—is very much in synch with the message of that magnificent Gospel hymn; that certainly marks the book *Ruth* as one of the truly great “liberal” and “liberating” books in the Biblical canon. And yet.

You may recall...you may recall my mentioning, two weeks ago, that each of the five Old Testament scrolls bears a special relationship to one of the great Jewish feasts. In the case of the book *Ruth* the feast in question is *Shavuot*, which we Christians refer to as Pentecost. While the Christian feast of Pentecost celebrates the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church, the Jewish feast on which it is based celebrates the birth of the people Israel through the giving of the Law, the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. In other words: the book *Ruth*—which celebrates the full humanity even of a Moabite woman—is inextricably linked to the most specifically Jewish of festivals, one that celebrates the unique heritage of the Jewish people as embodied in the five books of Moses. And there is a reason why that is appropriate: a reason having to do with the words Ruth speaks to Naomi, when she explains why she will not remain in Moab, why she insists on venturing back with Naomi even though that means becoming a stranger in a strange land. Ruth turns to Naomi and famously says:

*Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord—may **Yah** the God of Israel!!—do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.”*
Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

The paradox, of course: the paradox is that this most liberal of Biblical books is also one of the most poignantly conservative of Biblical books: strongly affirming the specific contours of Jewish identity while at the same time insisting that even a foreigner (even a Mexican...I mean even a Moabite!) can become part of the faithful community, can partake of its blessings and responsibilities, can embrace and be embraced in that identity...but in ways that honour and respect the traditions that come with that identity. How we might go about, in this day, applying that decidedly two-sided coin to the reality of Canadian identity? And what kinds of safeguards are we permitted to insist upon, so that an outsider such as myself can have the privilege and the blessing of being admitted to full-participation (we call it citizenship) within the life of this nation. Those are tough questions: let's not indulge in oversimplification and sloganeering when we glean wisdom from *Ruth* that might help us to ponder the challenges of Canadian identity. For that matter, let's not oversimplify what this same book might have to say to us in terms of how we navigate the tricky business of being the Church in the midst of a nation that is no longer prepared to think of itself as a Christian nation.

And yes: one of the great temptations we continue to face—especially in liberal Churches such as the United Church of Canada—one of our persistent temptations is to define our identity in such a way as to eradicate the markers separating the church from the world. As a pastor who yearns to fill as many of these chairs as possible—and as a believer who understands God to be the God of **all** people without exception—I am always wrestling with the temptation of trying to become all things to all people, the problem being that when you seek to become all things to all people, all too often you end up discovering that you are no-one to nobody! At that point, the Church is nothing more than a well-meaning service club, the sad truth, of course, being that the Rotarians do that far more effectively than we do.

And so yes: when we read the book *Ruth* not primarily as citizens of a nation, but as members of the Church: are we able to hear its liberal/conservative message for our time and place? Can we hold in proper tension its liberating message of the Gospel's universal reach...with its insistence that a Church which abandons the Gospel has very little to offer the world! In short: what might it mean...what might it involve for us to find renewal as a faith-community whose message is stubbornly concrete and specific, but whose doors are open wide for all who hear good news in that message. In short: might we dare to be a Church that might move a modern-day seeker, a contemporary Ruth to exclaim: *For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.* What might it mean to renew our life—our Christian life—as those who stubbornly hold in tension the universality of God's love, with the specific claims of the Gospel, refusing to water down either?

That challenge may very well be our defining challenge as Christians in the strange new world we inhabit here in our “home and native land”: a Canada that has changed so very much over the past 151 years. And oddly, wonderfully, the compact wisdom that comes to us from the ancient story of two courageous women finding their way in the Ancient Near East: their story may well help us to grasp, all the more sharply, the nature of the challenge we face.

May their story—Ruth’s and Naomi’s—challenge and encourage us: this day and always! Amen!!