

“God’s Habit of Welcome”
Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17
Brown Memorial Park Ave. Presbyterian
November 8, 2015
Rev. Kate Foster Connors

The book of Ruth is a remarkable story. If you’ve never read it, you should - it’s only 4 chapters, and it is beautifully written. To understand any one part of it, though, you need to know the whole story -

The Book of Ruth is the story of an Israelite family living in Bethlehem (in Judah) during the time of the Judges - a mother and a father, and two sons. At the time, Judah was experiencing a famine. So, driven by starvation, the family leaves their home country for a neighboring country called Moab, where food is more plentiful and they might make a better life for their family. Moab is not considered a friendly nation to Judah - in fact, the two countries have been in conflict for a long time.

While in Moab, the two sons grow up and marry local women - women who are ethnically and religiously different.

Tragically, the father and both sons die, leaving the mother, Naomi, in Moab with her 2 Moabite daughters-in-law and without the security of male kinsmen.

Meanwhile, life in Judah got better over the years, and there was no longer a famine, so Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, to her own country of Judah. Despite Naomi giving both daughters-in-law permission to return to their own families in Moab, one of them (Ruth) pledges to remain with Naomi, and leaves her country and her people, and re-settles in Bethlehem with her mother-in-law.

Our text for today picks up after Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem. They are trying to make a new life for themselves, and Ruth has been gleaning in the fields of a man named Boaz, who turns out to be a distant relative of Naomi’s.

[Read Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17]

No one would have thought twice if Ruth and Naomi had simply gone their own way. There’s nothing, really, that logically would have kept these two women together. They were from different countries, and different cultures.

Their family had been unusual to begin with: The Deuteronomic code forbid Jews from welcoming Moabites into their Assembly (Deut. 23:3), so when Naomi’s sons married Moabite women, they were crossing ancient lines prohibited in Torah. Ruth and Naomi weren’t expected to be family in the first place.

So after death left both of them widowed, going back to their own people would have been simpler. It would have put things back in order. Going back to their own people in their own countries would have been the expected choice for a widowed woman and her widowed daughter in law, especially women from enemy nations.

But this story does not deliver an expected plot; this story is full of surprises. What started out as an unlikely family formed across religious and national boundaries became even more

unlikely. In a culture where women were expected to be under the care of men, where tradition would have sent Ruth back to her family in Moab, Ruth instead pledged herself to Naomi.

So Ruth and Naomi stick together, and they journey nearly 50 miles, on foot, back to Naomi's country, where they have heard that the famine is gone and life has gotten better. And who knows how difficult that journey was for two women traveling alone, who have nothing. Who knows if anyone harassed them for associating with each other, people from two different nations who weren't supposed to be spending time together. Who knows if they were given a hard time for traveling without men. Who knows where they had to sleep, where they found food, how they found enough water along the way. Who knows what hardships they endured, who knows what that long journey was like?

Ahmad Majid knows something about long journeys. Traveling for months with his family after leaving Syria last summer, the Majid family (8 adults and six children, including Ahmad's pregnant wife, a baby, a toddler, and their 4 year-old son) fled the civil war in Syria after their family's business was looted and they were forced to close. Over a period of months, the family journeyed from Syria to Turkey and through eight European countries, finally settling this fall in Sweden.¹ Along the way, they faced border guards fences charged with keeping them out. They were left stranded for days in the Budapest train station. They were imprisoned in Denmark. They were ignored, and left to fend for themselves, and often, they were cursed and told to leave.

They were from the wrong religion, the wrong ethnic group, and the wrong country. More often than not, no one wanted them in their community.

And that's how the story usually goes, isn't it?

If you're in middle school, you know who you can sit with at lunch and who you can't. If you're in Congress, you know which bills you can support, and which ones you fight tooth and nail to oppose.

If you're liberal, you know which parts of Maryland you'd want to live in and which ones you wouldn't.

If you're well-off in Baltimore city, you know where you should buy a house and where you shouldn't.

If you're in a gang, you know who you can talk to and who you can't.

You don't cross those lines - you just don't.

In our city, neighborhoods are so segregated that a few years ago, when I was walking through Madison Park with a mostly-white church youth group, some firefighters asked us if we were lost when we passed by their station.

¹Hartocollis, Anemona: "A Syrian Family Swept Up in the Migrant Tide," *The New York Times*, October 24, 2015, p.1.

There are some lines we just don't cross. We stick with our own, we talk with people who agree with us, we live with people who look like us, and we build fences - or walls - to keep others out.

That is mostly what Majid and his family found on their long trek through Europe. And many people like them have encountered the same hostility while seeking a safe place for themselves and their families in a new country.

In Germany, "There have been xenophobic protests, and a planned asylum center [for Syrian refugees] was burned down..."²

Hungary's president instituted jail terms for migrants caught crossing a new razor-wire fence he ordered to be constructed, and Hungarian citizens now face punishment for offering help to migrants.

Ruth and Naomi made it to Bethlehem, despite whatever hardships they endured along the 50-mile trek from Moab.

And who knows how Ruth was received by the first people she encountered once they got there - the story doesn't tell us.

What we do know is that, in their determination to create a new life for themselves, Ruth and Naomi convince Boaz to take her in - and he does - Boaz takes in this migrant from an enemy nation - and lets her glean barley in his field - and he gives her food and drink, and invites her to continue gleaning barley so that she and Naomi might have food to eat.

And we know - from today's text - how the story proceeds. Boaz and Ruth get married, and they have a son. Ruth and Naomi and Boaz create a new family in Bethlehem - a blended family, now with what might be called a biracial child.

The remarkable story of Ruth makes the case for expanding the community to embrace - and even to love - people from other ethnic groups.

I'd like to say that this is because God wanted the community to expand, that God wanted the community to be more inclusive. But God is not mentioned as an actor in the entire book, other than being given credit for Ruth's pregnancy.

Naomi and Ruth, and Boaz, and the people of Bethlehem they encounter, clearly are people of faith - they mention their loyalty to the God of Israel, they offer God's blessings on one another and they give thanks to God for the blessing of a child born to Ruth and Boaz. But God is not given credit for the most remarkable part of this story, the welcome of a foreign woman into Naomi's extended family and community.

And that's often how it is, isn't it?

A lot of people I know struggle to discern God's action in their lives. We want to believe that God is at work around us, that God is working out God's justice and God's love in this city where

² <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/02/europe/europe-migrants-welcome/>, accessed 11/6/2015.

brokenness can be found on every block. But it's not always easy to know how God is acting in our world.

What we do know is that our God has a long habit of welcoming the stranger. Whether it was Abraham and Sarah welcoming 3 traveling men into their home (Gen 18:1-10), or Rahab outwitting the King of Jericho and hiding Joshua's men from capture (Joshua 2:1-24), or Jesus eating with Zacchaeus the tax collector (Luke 19:1-10), welcoming children (Luke 18:15-17), or greeting the strangers on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), throughout the history of God and God's people, God has made a place for the ones who were the least welcome.

In Hungary, and Germany, and in many other European countries, there were people who helped Majid and his family, who shared food, brought them water as they walked or gave them tips about how to navigate dangerous border crossings. Who risked angering neighbors, and in some cases, their own government, to help refugees like Majid and his family who were passing through their towns.

In Iceland, whose government declared it could only take in 50 Syrian refugees, one woman launched a Facebook campaign asking folks to offer space in their homes, and she now has 12,000 people signed up to offer refuge.³

When Hungary's president shut down the trains that would have carried migrants across the border to Austria, hundreds of the travelers decided to start walking, and Hungarian people lined the roads along the way, giving their Syrian brothers and sisters clothing, water and food.

Some of you probably read Liz Bowie's series of articles in *The Sun* about teenage immigrants as they make a new life for themselves in our city. Right here in Baltimore, people like Tom Smith, a teacher at Patterson High who has taken dozens of immigrant teens under his wings as they try to get back on their feet in a new country, or Margot Harris, an English as a Second Language teacher. Or Kelly O'Brien, a Spanish teacher, all of whom have put in time way beyond their commitments in the classroom, just to help their students adjust to their lives in a new country.

And what is it that each of us can do, what are the ways that we can welcome the strangers in our midst?

What are the ways we can cross those lines that keep people separated?

What are the risks we're willing to take to love people who are different from us?

Because that's often where God shows up. We can get so busy looking for God on high, when maybe God shows up in everyday acts of welcome. In small risks people take every day, risks that might make them uncomfortable, or scared, that might take them to the wrong neighborhood, or the wrong country, or the wrong people, to show others that they are welcome.

³ <http://www.cnn.com/2015/09/02/europe/europe-migrants-welcome/>, accessed 11/6/2015.

The testimony of our ancestors in the faith tells us again and again that God shows up in those acts of welcome, the acts of radical hospitality that build the community up instead of tearing it down.

At the end of the book of Ruth, the Grandfather of David, in the line that led to Jesus, is born to Ruth and Boaz. Obed, a biracial child born out of the extraordinary commitment, and courage, and determination, of two women who dared to cross the lines that would separate them, who proclaimed their faith in a God who is in the habit of welcoming the stranger.