

Ruth 4:13-22
All's Well That Ends Well
WRCOB 7.12.20

Our story begins with a couple named, Elimelech and Naomi
Leaving Bethlehem with their two sons.

They move to Moab
A country to the east of the Dead Sea
Considered an enemy of Israel.

Earlier Moab refused entry to Moses and the Hebrews
As they journeyed through the wilderness
To the Promised Land.

Relations hadn't been good since.

While in Moab, Naomi's husband and two sons die.

She returns to Bethlehem
Accompanied by one of the sons' wives
Ruth, a Moabite.

Seeing no way to obtain provisions
Ruth goes out, and as Jewish tradition allows
Gleans fields during the harvest season.

She gleanes the field of a kind and generous man, Boaz
Who takes an interest in Ruth
And is a relative to Elimelech.

Encouraged by Boaz' kindness
Naomi arranges a bold plan
For Boaz to marry Ruth.

She has Ruth go to Boaz
And while he's asleep lie down at his feet.

Surprised and endeared by Ruth's actions
Boaz commits to taking the matter into hand.

He acknowledges that there is another, a closer relative
And he should be the first to be offered
Ruth's hand in marriage.

The nearer-relative refuses.

Boaz then stands before the witnesses and crowd gathered
And pronounces his intentions to marry Ruth.

This brings us to the conclusion of our story
As read by Terrie in our Scripture Lesson..

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We read the climatic ending.

Boaz marries Ruth.
She conceives and bears a son.

Everyone rejoices and praises God.

The women in the community name the son.
They name him Obed.

Obed becomes the father of Jesse
And Jesse becomes the father of David.

Wait a minute, David?
Is the narrator referring to THE KING DAVID?
The greatest king Israel ever had . . . that David?

And then if that is not clear enough
The narrator goes through the genealogy again
This time from Perez to David.

That is the very same David.

Ok, so let me see if I get this right.

David's great-grandmother was Ruth
The foreign daughter-in-law Naomi's, the Moabite?

Imagine the shock!

Particularly since the current preaching of the day
When the author wrote the story
Was that "a pure race was a holy race."

Some place the date of the book in the post-exilic period
During the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.

A time when the Babylonians forced the Jews
Away from their homeland to live in foreign lands.

Jewish men began to marry foreign wives.

When King Cyrus of Syria allowed the Jews to return
They brought their foreign wives with them.

Racism began to spread throughout the lands
Fueled by Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor
Who preached and demanded racial purity.

**Ezra 10:10-11 ¹⁰ Ezra the priest stood up and said:
You have broken God's Law by marrying foreign
women, and you have made the whole nation
guilty! ¹¹ Now you must confess your sins to
the Lord God of your ancestors and obey him. Divorce
your foreign wives and don't have anything to do with
the rest of the foreigners who live around here.**

For the readers of Ruth to discover that the Davidic line
Was in fact, tainted with the blood of a Moabite
Was the actual punch line to the story.

Really, can this be any more of a shock
Than, say for instance white supremacists to discover

Their supreme leader's great grandmother
Was an enslaved African American!

And I don't think I am exaggerating here.

With this in mind, I have some questions.

What is the purpose of the story?

Is it to give us a simple love story
Expressing commitment, loyalty
And devotion in its various forms?

Or is its purpose to teach us a lesson on redemption?

Boaz, the family redeemer, who saves the family
By marrying Ruth thereby preserving
Elimelech's family for future generations.

These are themes within the story.

Is the purpose to simply show us King David's ancestry?

Yes . . . but it's more than that.

I believe the author wrote the story
As a subtle push-back
To the existing racism in Judaism
During the time of its writing?

Without saying as much
The author depicts racist undercurrents in the story.

For instance, the author, hardly ever, mentions Ruth
Without describing her as the Moabite or foreigner.

This is intentional . . .
Making sure his audience remembers a key point.

Boaz's harsh commands to his workers
Not to mistreat Ruth

Is a hint workers often mistreated the foreigners
Following behind them in the field.

If that be the case

It must have been especially appalling for the workers
When Boaz invites Ruth to have lunch with them.

He has her sit with them and even invites her
To dip her food into a common bowl.

This is so similar to the Jim Crow era
With its segregated water fountains
Restrooms and restaurants.

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Another question then, why the subtlety?

The author never mentions it for what it is, racism.

Why wouldn't the author just clearly state
In his/her opening statement something like

"Hear ye, hear ye, the story of the great King David's
Great-grandmother, Ruth, a Moabite"

Why wait to mention that Ruth is kin to David
At the END of the story?

I am just speculating here.

But I think, again, this is intentional.

The author strategically designed the story
To suck us in
To engage it on a personal level
To emotionally draw us in.

If we were the Jewish audience the story was addressing
We would know Ezra's and Nehemiah's
Push to rid the nation of foreign wives.

We would come to the story
With our own prejudices and presuppositions.

“A good Moabite is a dead Moabite.”

We'd have already built our walls of hatred for the Moabites.

But when the author begins the story
Without the audience's knowledge
Of Ruth's relationship to David

We might still have our prejudices.

But as the author walks us through the story
And we begin to see Ruth's character.

We begin to admire and appreciate her virtues.

We let our prejudicial guard down
And before we realize it
We're, too, are in love with Ruth.

You just can't help it.

We reach the climax of the story
And we shout out, “Yea, praise God!”
“A son is born and is named Obed.”

Hey, wait a minute.
That name is familiar.

And there we are.

With our personal engagement in the story
We have to re-evaluate our racist attitude.

You tell me why the author
Saves the genealogy until the very end.

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Which leaves me with one more question.

Why would they include the Book of Ruth in the Bible
If it exposes Judea’s racism?

Perhaps, for that very reason.

The Bible doesn’t mind challenging itself on things.

Those whom God inspired to create Scripture
Wanted to show that practices and perspectives
Are constantly evolving.

Earlier, Deuteronomy 23 declares Moabites unclean.

Do not associate with them.

Ruth comes along and changes our perspective.

According to Jeremiah 25 people from Uz were evil.

Then a man from Uz, named Job, comes along
And Scripture ends up calling him
“The most blameless man on earth.”

The people of Palestine during the time of Jesus
Hated the Samaritans
But Jesus uses one as an example of neighborliness.

Earlier, foreigners nor eunuchs
Were allowed into the Jewish assembly.

But here comes an African eunuch whom Philip baptizes.

As Bixby Knolls writes

“The story may begin with prejudice, discrimination, and animosity, but the Spirit moves God’s people towards openness, welcome, inclusion, acceptance, and affirmation.”

Today, the church faces many challenges.

The Black Lives Matter movement
Challenges the church to evaluate its response to racism.

As a church, we are responsible to be informed.

As a church, God calls us to be transformed.

Romans 12:1-2 NRSV ¹ I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

One of the ways I see the church transforming
Is through what Fred Craddock calls “othering.”

According to the late Rev. Fred Craddock
“Othering” is the principle
Of seeking others who are not like you
Your ethnicity
The color of your skin
Or your social status.

Get acquainted, make friends
Serve together, join in activities, do something
With people who are different than you.

Or as Craddock would say, do some “othering”.

In this type of engagement
We will be more informed and transformed.

This, I believe, is what the author of the Book of Ruth
Was attempting to do when he/she wrote the story.

Ruth is different.

She is a foreigner.

She is a Moabite.

But we discover she is worth knowing

Not only because

She is the great-grandmother to King David

But because she is a woman of integrity.

We learned from someone different from us

Of love, devotion, and extreme loyalty

Traits we all wish we had more.

Ruth 1:16-17 NIV ¹⁶ But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

In the Book of Ruth the author has just “othered” us.

May God transform us with the renewing of our minds

So that we may discern the will of God

And what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This is my prayer. Amen.