

Boundaries

Ruth, selected verses

Center Church

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How quickly we forget our history. Not just as Americans, but as human beings! We create myths and stories to make it seem like what we want to be true was always true. At Thanksgiving, we want to believe that in the beginning the Native peoples of this land generously welcomed the peaceful immigrants (the Pilgrims) and they all lived happily ever after. Not even close. Not even in Plymouth. Some Americans forget that their ancestors came here without any official papers and certainly without permission, and that they came in large groups, overwhelming places like New York and Boston. Some Americans forget that much of the part of the country we now call the Southwest had been inhabited not only by Native peoples but by Spanish speaking descendants of the Spanish conquerors of Mexico and Central America for at least a century before any English-speaking settlers got there. How do we think all those California, New Mexico, Arizona and Texas cities got their Spanish names? Some Americans forget that the majority of Black Americans descend from people who never wanted to come here at all but were forced to come, forced into slavery, and treated as lesser Americans to this day. We forget who we were, and so we get arrogant about who we are now.

This has happened in most cultures over millennia! The reason that the book of Ruth was written and preserved has to do with exactly the kind of history-forgetting that ends up creating false boundaries between people and divisions based on ethnicity and race where none should exist.

If anyone knows anything about the book of Ruth, it is often this lovely poem at the beginning of the book that people use for weddings. "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God."

Subversive thing number 1 about the story of Ruth: those words are spoken from a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law. From a daughter-in-law of a different nationality and religion than the mother-in-law. From a daughter-in-law from a nation often seen as the enemy of the people of her mother-in-law. Much as I hope Maeghan and Kyle feel this way about

one another, this poem is not actually about you or for you! This poem is a vow of commitment between two women of different faiths and different ethnicities and different generations. It's about boundary-crossing relationships and their value.

Subversive thing number 2 about the story of Ruth: the wealthy landowner Boaz judges Ruth by the content of her character, not the color of her skin, her ethnicity, her religious background, or her poverty. As the story implies, the poor who gleaned behind the reapers were often subjected to abuse by the reapers and their supervisors. Ruth fell under the protection of Boaz because he took the time to learn her story. He heard how she had traveled with Naomi the long distance, both physically and emotionally, back to Naomi's home. How she protected her, helped her and comforted her. How she now engaged in backbreaking work to provide for Naomi. How she sacrificed her own family, nation and religion for Naomi. Ruth asks Boaz, "why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" Because in Boaz's eyes, she is not "Foreigner," but "Loving daughter-in-law." She has a story. Every immigrant does.

Subversive thing number 3 about the story of Ruth comes at the very end of the book. It's one of those boring genealogies that everyone always skips over when they read the Bible. Not this time! Ruth marries Boaz and gives birth to a son, named Obed. Twice we are told that his descendants look like this: Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David. That's King David, the famous one, the musician who wrote many of the Psalms, the one who defeated the giant Goliath with a slingshot, the one who became the greatest King in the history of Israel. David, whose great-grandmother was not an Israelite at all, but a woman of Moab named Ruth. While we don't know exactly when Ruth's story was written down, many scholars think it took its current form in the 5th century before Christ, when a great controversy arose over the issue of intermarriage between Israelites and foreigners after the return from exile. The subversive prophet who made sure this story got included in the history books (was she a woman?) called Israel to remember who they were. It is named "Ruth" not "Naomi," which it could have been, to make a very clear point. Ruth epitomizes the line from the musical *Hamilton*, "Immigrants, we get the job done!"

So, let's remember.

If the rag-tag exhausted, frightened and desperate group of people traveling through Mexico on the way to the US border with babies and children are “invaders,” so were the Pilgrims and Puritans and Thomas Hooker.

If we think it is okay that in 2018 to date only **50** of the thousands of Syrians fleeing bombs dropped by us and Russia and ISIS and God-knows-who-else have been allowed to re-settle in the US, then one of my ancestors who fled Germany during the 19th century “year without a summer” famine should have been stopped before he got on the ship.

If we believe the story that immigrants just come to this country to use social services and are lazy, then imagine what would happen if all the places where you encounter immigrants at work: as caregivers to the elderly, cleaners in nursing homes and office buildings, cooks in restaurants, picking the food you eat, providing high quality medical care and research, teaching at colleges and universities, etc. suddenly had no immigrants working there.

The story of Ruth, right there in the middle of the history of the people of Israel, reminded them, and reminds us, to tell our history straight and remember who we were accurately, because it makes a difference to who we are now.

I sat at the Interfaith Prayer Breakfast in Hartford this week and listened to Chris George of the refugee resettlement agency IRIS speak. He reminded us that refugees take enormous risks to seek safety and freedom for themselves and their families. Then he challenged us: can we not take the risk of telling the truth when we hear myths and outright lies about both the present and the past? Can we not take the risk to listen to the stories of immigrants we encounter in our lives, as did Boaz, and to find shared humanity with each other beyond boundaries and labels? Chris George said, “Welcoming immigrants is perhaps our most American tradition!” I think Ruth reminds us that it is also a Jewish and Christian basic practice. Remember that the killings last week at Tree of Life synagogue were not just because the killer hated Jews. They were celebrating their partnership with a large Jewish agency which supports refugees and immigrants! Can we be as courageous as them and as subversive and honest as the teller of Ruth’s story? Amen.