

Ruth 1:1-18
Mark 12:28-34

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November 1, 2009

THE SUBVERSIVE FOREIGNER

Everyone knows the Book of Ruth is about the admirable virtue of loyalty. It's right there on the front of your bulletin. "Wherever you go" pledges the devoted Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi, "I will go. . ." We should be loyal like Ruth. Go and do likewise. That's an easy sermon.

Wait, there's a red challenge flag on the field! Roll the instant replay. The Book of Ruth is a mere 85 verses long. In this very short story, "redeem" and its derivatives "redeemer" and "redemption" are used 23 times. The evidence is conclusive. The ruling on the field is overturned. This story is not mainly about the virtue of loyalty and what we should be. It is about redemption, the reversal of fortunes, material and spiritual, and what God does.

The Book of Ruth opens with a series of ironies. Famine comes to Bethlehem which in Hebrew means, "the house of bread." Members of a clan whose name means "fruitful" die off, one after another, leaving no children or "fruit." We should have seen it coming "Mahlon" sounds very much like the Hebrew word for the disease that afflicted Egypt prior to the Exodus. The name of his brother "Chilion," is derived from the root, "to perish." You know those guys aren't long for this world.

The big irony is that the family went to Moab. You know how it is in horror films. It's Halloween night. There's a raging storm. The power goes out. Eerie music wells up. The beautiful young woman takes a flickering candle and decides to go down into the dark, spooky basement. Why doesn't she just wait until morning when the storm has passed and the power is restored, but no! Everyone in the theater is thinking, "Don't go to the basement!"

That's how the first hearers of this story would have reacted to Elimelech's decision to go to Moab. No! Don't go there! That's the worst possible place! There was a long history of hostility between Israel and Moab. In Israel's collective nightmare, the axe murderer was *always* a Moabite. Sure enough, we're only five verses into the story and half the family is dead. Just goes to show Moab is a monstrous place. The ancient prejudices are confirmed.

Then we come to a scene that is not as clear-cut as it would seem. Ruth pledges to Naomi, "where you go I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. . ." It's a shining example of devoted loyalty, but there is a problem. Where was Ruth's loyalty to her own family? By the legal and moral standards of the culture, it is Orpah, not Ruth, who does the right thing. Orpah returns to her own people out of loyalty to them.

Ruth insists on going with Naomi. The two argue. It ends when Naomi "said no more." That could mean Naomi lapsed into silence, overwhelmed with gratitude. It could also mean Naomi was so fed up with Ruth she stopped speaking to her. Bringing a Moabite into the family would not have endeared Naomi to her relatives. I suspect Naomi thought Ruth a bit of a pest and wanted to be rid of her.

The story goes on. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem. Naomi is depressed, empty, bitter and angry with the Lord for giving her a raw deal. Ruth attracts the attention of Boaz, a wealthy landowner. Naomi coaches her daughter-in-law in the art of seduction. The Book of Ruth is a romantic comedy. Ruth and Boaz marry and have a child. Naomi will not live in poverty, and she has a step-grandchild to look after. The story ends happily.

The Book of Ruth is not just an interesting family story. It is an extended parable. It matters with whom we identify. Maybe we *should* be like Ruth, which is to say, loyal. Loyalty is good. Ruth represents an ideal whom we aspire to be. I submit Naomi represents who we actually are as people of God. Naomi is redeemed from the pit of bitterness and despair. The Lord uses the least likely person, Ruth, a despised Moabite, a stubborn pest, to rescue Naomi. But not only

her. Among Ruth's descendants will be David and Jesus. This parable of redemption ripples down through the centuries. At a critical point God uses a Moabite, whom any decent person would have rejected, to keep the story of redemption going. Apparently God is not bound by standards of decency.

When we wrestle with conflicts over who is acceptable and who is not, the story of Ruth is subversive of rigid standards of decency. Right now the Episcopal Church is in an uproar over the consecration of a gay bishop. There have been countless gay bishops in the past. They didn't tell and nobody asked. Now the issue of sexual orientation is out in the open. Last week, the Vatican weighed in, inviting Episcopalians who object to gay bishops and women priests--another point of contention--to convert to Catholicism.

According to a poll last spring, 48% of Americans expressed an unfavorable view of Islam. Fifty-five percent reported they do not have good understanding of the teachings and beliefs of Islam. Muslims make up .8% of the population of the United States. The vast majority of Americans don't even know a Muslim. A great many Americans have made a negative judgment on a faith they know virtually nothing about.

Then there are our own personal Moabites, those people we find not just disagreeable, but revolting. I'm thinking of white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and legal loan sharks who prey upon the poor. Your list of Moabites may be different from mine, but we all draw the line somewhere. Some people are beyond the pale from whom no good can come.

The parable of Ruth subverts any judgment we make on others--even when we quote the Bible to do it. Ezra and Nehemiah explicitly condemn Moabites. Israelite men are commanded to abandon their Moabite wives and any children they had with them. The women and children would have been left in poverty, most likely to starve.

It's a harsh judgment, and it's right there in our Bible. So is the Book of Ruth subverting that judgment. If the Lord can use someone the Bible condemns to bring about redemption, then we ought to be cautious about whom we exclude even when we use the Bible to justify our judgment.

The parable of Ruth restrains our judgment even on ourselves. None of us here is a towering spiritual figure. None of us here will be remembered centuries from now as a hero of the faith. But the Lord used a no-account Moabite to redeem the life of Naomi. Ruth didn't do anything dramatic or earth-shattering, yet Naomi was rescued from the pit of bitterness and despair. Is it possible God could use you and me in the same way?

Every Sunday we pray for specific people. Some are healed and some aren't. In the simple act of prayer we open ourselves for God to use in the redemption of others. When we repair a home of someone in need, feed the hungry or teach a Sunday School class, we allow the Lord to reach through us to another human being. When we tutor a struggling student, listen to a hurting friend, or stand up for the oppressed, we let God make *us* God's gift to the world.

The story of Ruth and Naomi subverts all our attempts to determine who does and does not belong to the people of God. Their story also is a promise that God does use Moabites--and people like you and me--to redeem the world from bitterness and despair.

Amen.

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