

Texts: Ruth 2:1-20; 4:9-17

Subject: Ruth Meets Boaz, Marriage of Ruth and Boaz

Theme: Blessings Unknown

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; July 19, 2020, Online; Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV;

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

Some time before World War II, a young woman and her husband emigrated to the United States and lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There, they found a community of immigrants, that shared their culture and language. They were able to work and worship God in this new place, and yet it was different than the home and hardships they left behind. They were longing for freedom, safety, and opportunities to start their family. Paul got work as a hairdresser, and his wife Freda, cared for their young twins. They came to this country at a time when it might not have always been safe to speak their native language. They may have felt like outsiders at times, and yet, they were given a chance to thrive, and build a life. After the war, they moved to Florida, helped start a church out among the orange groves, and held beauty pageants. Their daughter Rita had two boys who never spoke much German. One of them became a father, and *his* first son became the pastor of this church in Las Vegas, had four kids with a woman whose mother came here from another country. My great grandmother wrote about her life, and her experiences *and visions* of Jesus, so that her descendants and all who read it would know the story, and that we would share her love of the Lord. It is a blessing to know where they came from, and to become more familiar with their history and the roots of my family tree.

The immigrant story is one most of us are familiar with at some level. Maybe it was *your* parents or grandparents who came here from Finland, Sweden, Norway,

Germany, Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, or Bulgaria. Maybe they struggled to fit in so you could have the life they only dreamed of. Maybe they left their nation of origin to find work, or maybe for a safer existence. How were they received by their new community? That would likely depend on the prevailing sentiment toward people from that nation at the particular time.

Coming from Moab, Ruth would be certainly have felt like an outsider. To begin to understand this, we have to know about Moab - it was a nation across the sea from Judea, not that far, named for the child born to the first daughter of Lot. To the north, was Ammon, home of the Ammonites, named for the child born to the second daughter of Lot. We hear this origin story in 8 verses at the end of Genesis chapter 19, where the daughters of Lot live up in the hills, where there are no other men. They get their father drunk and become pregnant and have children. Israel and the Moabites have some bad history and according to Deuteronomy, they were “not welcome in the Lord’s assembly.” We can know from the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, that during the time when Israel was allowed to come back home after the fall of Jerusalem that the people were very concerned with immigrants and intermarriage. This is the time in which this book of Ruth is likely written. This beautiful story includes family tragedy, hope, promises, redemption, and love. It’s a short book, with little mention of God in it at all, but includes a central message of God’s redeeming love for all the world.

Any good story has a great cast of characters and this one begins by introducing us to them. There’s Elimelech, husband of Naomi, but he died. Then we have their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, but they’re dead too. They married wives from Moab - how scandalous - named Orpah and Ruth. After the men all died, Naomi hears there is food

back home, so she makes plans to say goodbye to her daughters in law - Orpah follows directions and goes back home to her folks, but Ruth decides to go with Naomi and take her chances there. We can already be quite sure she may have a hard time fitting in there, because the book doesn't just refer to her as Ruth, but insists on repeating her place of origin. She's Ruth *the Moabite* - just in case we forgot.

Growing up in Florida, I had friends and classmates from all over the world. They were from China, Pakistan, India, Egypt, Haiti, the Bahamas, Belize, Cuba, Peru, and even New York. Some tried their best to fit in, while others shared their culture with pride. At times they faced ridicule, abuse, and bullying. Was it because of fear? Lack of understanding? I could only imagine having to deal with that kind of stress on top of being a young person just trying to get through high school.

Why should we be afraid? Why would we not share what we have? How could we not welcome strangers, and give away what has been given to us? We must let go of that scarcity mentality - the fear that what we have is not enough, that there is not enough to go around. It's our nature to hoard and dominate. It's hard to quit it. We are territorial, uncharitable, and antagonistic toward those who are different from us - and yet we know we are all foreigners here. We know that we live in a nation of immigrants.

Every day people have to leave their homes to find safety, help, food, and a better life. Immigrants still struggle to live safely in this country, and some young people who have grown up their entire life within our borders must continuously fear that they may be sent back to a country they have never known. In our lifetime, the U.S. has become known for a lack of hospitality where immigrants and refugees are unwelcome.

Last week, I was on a call with staff of one of our local congressional representatives, our Bishop, and folks from Lutheran Immigration Refugee Services. Bishop Hutterer and I shared our concerns for the needs of refugees and immigrants attempting to find help in our country. In recent weeks, over 900 children have been expelled under a pandemic border policy. We know the current administration has drastically lowered the number of immigrants and refugees allowed to enter the U.S., and have asked for our elected officials to push for an increase in that number. In congress, the Committee on Homeland Security held a hearing last week on improper spending, deaths, and medical care of children in custody of Customs and Border Patrol. There are children locked in cages just miles from where we live. Cruzando Fronteras, a ministry partner with the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona and the Grand Canyon Synod of the ELCA, of which our church is a part, reports that 153 women, men, and children live at La Casa, a residential shelter in Nogales, Mexico. Asylum seekers there are in need of education, medical care, legal representation, and spiritual support, along with the basic necessities.

Naomi didn't know what she would be returning to. She might have expected that someone there would care for her, as she had some relations that would uphold their obligations to the widow. Ruth had *no* expectations of help or safe harbor. She would have been unknown to them, likely unwelcome by many, and unable to care for herself. This book makes little mention of God, yet in the narrative we hear the presence of the one who protects, who redeems, who provides new life, change, and a way forward.

Ruth finds Boaz, a relative of Naomi - who has heard her story. He welcomes her and provides protection and food for her and Naomi as well. She finds favor with him,

and he becomes for her a redeemer, one to protect, provide, and continue her family line, to give her a new future. Could she have imagined the blessings she would find in her new home? Could she have ever have known the welcome she would receive?

There was another who could have helped. Yes, Naomi had another relative, and Boaz went to him and asked if he'd buy the land that belonged to the dead husband of Naomi, and he agreed to do it, but backed out when he heard that Ruth the Moabite would become a part of his family if he did it. So Boaz was the one to step up and purchase the land and have Ruth as his wife. By the end of the story she's not Ruth the Moabite, but Ruth - great-grandmother of David, who will be Israel's greatest King, and ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth.

Each time we we turn away one in need, we fail to live up to God's call to welcome the stranger; We forget Jesus' invitation to "let the little children come;" we give up on His command to love our neighbor as ourselves. In our lack of welcome of refugees and immigrants, how many blessings have we missed?

Yes, we are a nation of immigrants, but more than that - we are *all* beloved children of God. That love sees no borders and no boundaries. I know we need rules, we need good order, but as human beings, as Christians, as followers of Jesus, we place our trust not in nations, but in God's promises. Each one of us is a part of that adoptive family whose citizenship is in heaven. We are all born into this world, in need, hungry, afraid, into different circumstances, but with the same vulnerabilities. Each of us wants the same things, safety, dignity, something to do, and someone to love. In the faces of immigrants and refugees, we see neighbors most in need of welcome, help, hope, and a word of grace.

We are all struggling now, and more than ever need one another. This is not the time to turn our backs on the world. We need our siblings from all tribes and nations to conquer the fear of this age and love each other into the new future God has in store for us. We are not alone. We have a redeemer too. We have a relative who who will do what no other will do for us. He died for us, he calls us by name, and promises never to leave us abandoned.

I don't know Boaz, but I know Jesus - who welcomes us in spite of our sin. Even though we are afraid, even though we are territorial, even though we are selfish - Jesus is the one who forgives us and gives us a new life, and blessings unknown. We have the Holy Spirit, and with power she produces fruit in us, and enlivens us to trust the promises given to us in baptism, to proclaim Christ, to care for others, and the world God made, and to work for justice and peace. We aren't entitled to *anything* other than the consequences of our sin. We haven't earned any salvation, yet God who see us, who welcomes us, redeems and delivers us and gifts us with a life that is more than we could ever imagine.

My youngest son reminds me, "sharing is caring." He says it better than he does it. But he's right. We have been given so much, and are only worse off when we fail to share it. May we trust in the one who gives such unbounded mercy, such lavish love, and such amazing grace. Amen.