

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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November 5, 2017
9th Sunday in Called to Life
Ruth 1:1-18

Called to Family

Sometimes it's the most simple and most basic parts of our faith that can become the parts that we get tripped up on as we seek to live in faithfulness to our God. One of those basic parts that we often just can't seem to keep straight is the extent and bounds of God's inclusive love. It seems that we forever find ourselves in the situation of either defining ourselves or being pushed by others to define the limits of God's love. We can find ourselves doing this in a number of ways.

This can happen when we encounter those who have a somewhat different world view than we do and we can find ourselves concluding that their world view must be wrong because it is so different from our world view. Rather than taking the opportunity to look more closely at both the alternative world view as well as at our own in order to find what points of intersection there are, we can find it easier to myopically conclude that our world view is right and any other is wrong. And when we turn to our Christian faith and carelessly equate our perspective with that of the faith, we have started down the trail of limiting the extent and bounds of God's inclusive love.

A case in point in our own nation's history is how Christian missionaries who were accompanying the pioneers who were moving westward in the development of our nation, equated western European norms, customs and practices with the sharing of the good news of the gospel of Jesus. Nowhere was this more egregious than in the so called evangelization of the indigenous people of North America—the American Indians. Just about everything about the culture and practices of the Native Americans was suspect—their dress, their lifestyle, their hairstyle, their language, their diet, their familial customs, their spiritual practices. All of these were deemed to be un-Christian and therefore expendable in the service of bringing the American Indians into the fold of God's love within the Christian church. In some cases American Indian children were taken from their own families in order to "save" them and Christianize them in boarding schools where they were not allowed to speak their native language and had to begin acting like and adopting western European way of doing things. Only then would they be deemed to be within the Christian family of faith. Membership in the body of Christ at that time involved accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior and looking and acting like everyone else in the room.

A similar phenomenon took place with many Christian missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries traveling from America to Asia and remote parts of Africa. The Christian gospel was equated with the spreading of American culture, values, and practices.

Fortunately, along the way there were those leaders from within the Christian community who came to recognize this misguided and unjustifiable confluence of particular cultural practices and perspective with the basic good news of the gospel of Jesus. It was their cries of foul that brought the Christian church back into embracing the full inclusive love of God.

As was shared last Sunday and as it has been in the news, it was 500 years ago on October 31 this year that a German monk named Martin Luther publically declared his alarm over the Catholic Church's having taken the simple and inclusive love of God and regimented it in such a way that it was hardly recognizable as congruent and consistent with Scripture.

Interestingly though, the Scriptures themselves, of the Hebrew Bible—the Old Testament—as well as the New Testament contain numerous examples of God’s people getting off track with regard to God’s broadly inclusive love.

One such example of the many such instances in the Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible book of Ruth. This book is one of the gems of the Bible in that it tells a beautiful story of God’s love as lived out in a particular family.

The story starts in Bethlehem—yes the very same Bethlehem that we’ll be reading about on Christmas Eve. Because there was a famine in their land, a Hebrew family, who was part of God’s people in Judah, pulled up stakes and moved to the foreign land of Moab. This was a place that while it had the means to support a family was not part of the land of God’s people. It was a different culture and had different religious practices. The family consisted of a man named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their 2 sons, Mahlon and Chilion. While the boys were still in the household, their father died, leaving the widowed Naomi with her boys. When the 2 boys became old enough to marry, they took Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth as their wives. Their widowed mother continued to live under the care of her sons for 10 years after which both of them, Mahlon and Chilion, also died.

In both ancient near eastern culture and Hebrew culture, this deadly situation of Naomi having lost both her husband as well as her only 2 sons, left her in a desperately precarious situation. There was no one left with the responsibility and obligation to care for Naomi in her widowhood. Furthermore, Naomi was a Hebrew woman living in a foreign country with no cultural or societal standing. Her 2 childless daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, both Moabitesses living in their culture as young widows would at least have the opportunity to marry again within their own people.

So Naomi does the only thing left in her power to find a way for herself, begins the trek from Moab to return to her own people in the little town of Bethlehem. Her 2 widowed daughters-in-law set out with her on this journey. But as they do Naomi tries to stop them by reminding them of what they already knew—that Naomi does not and would not have the means to support them. She tells them to stay in their own land among their own people where they will find support. Orpah and Ruth first object to Naomi’s suggestion and then break into tears over the prospect of becoming separated from their mother-in-law. But Naomi persists in making clear that they must not accompany her to what would be a foreign land for them. She enjoins them that they must stay in their own land.

After more weeping, Orpah takes Naomi’s advice and after kissing Naomi she heads back to her people in Moab. When Naomi makes Orpah an example for Ruth to emulate, Ruth objects with a passionate statement that has become a beautiful recitation of answering the call to family and to commitment.

Do not press me to leave you
 or turn back from following you!
 Where you will go, I will go;
 where you lodge, I will lodge;
 your people shall be my people,
 and your God my God.
 Where you die, I will die—
 There will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you! (Ruth 1:16-17)

It is after this declaration that Naomi acquiesces and gives up on her efforts to dissuade Ruth from accompanying her. Ruth and Naomi continue together to travel to the land of Judah and to Bethlehem. Ruth becomes a part of the people of God through her accepting the call to family that she has forged in her bond with her mother-in-law.

This event of Ruth's becoming part of the Jewish religion, as one from among the people of a nation at odds with Judah (even an enemy), is an example of God breaking through to the human creatures to remind them this divine love is for way more than just the number counted among the immediate followers.

Professor Kathleen M. O'Connor comments on the ground-breaking significance of Ruth's decision. "The theological ground of [this first part] from Ruth is a God of fierce inclusivity, even though God remains largely in the background. The book of Ruth probably arose as a potent critique of the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah in the period of the restoration of Jerusalem. These two leaders tried to purify Israel and cement its ethnic identity by casting out foreign wives and their children from the land. Ruth is a foreign woman and wife who does not diffuse Israel's essence by being who she is but instead, in a marvelous reversal of expectation, acts as a savior of the nation." (*Feasting on the Word: preaching the revised common lectionary*, Year B, vol. 4, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2009 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 242)

I really encourage you to read the rest of the book of Ruth—just 3 more chapters. As the rest of the story of Ruth unfolds, she settles in Judah and meets a man named Boaz who eventually becomes her husband. And it is their son, Obed, who becomes the grandfather of David who will become the greatest king of Israel. But not only that, Joseph, the father of Jesus is in the lineage that is traced back to Ruth making Ruth is a foremother of Jesus himself.

This story of Ruth is powerful story of call as we continue our journey in this Year of Call. As she comes into the story of God's people she is not yet part of God's people. And yet, by the work of God in her life, she recognizes a call in the powerful bond of love that she feels for her mother-in-law. God's activity in her life had significant implications for the history of God's people, reminding them that God's inclusive love is deeper, broader, higher and wider than they had imagined.

My friends, there are powerful forces at work today that seek to divide and separate and to ultimately turn us against the other. May this story of Ruth, that we have revisited today, be a powerful reminder that Christianity must remain above that which leads to such demarcation. And may we recommit ourselves in our callings to remain faithful to the God of Elimelech, the God of Naomi, the God of Ruth, the God of David and the God and father of Jesus Christ who is our Lord and Savior.