

Ruth... an ancient Jewish story about committed love, between surprising or unlikely heroines, Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. Let's first review a brief synopsis of the story! The story was most likely written when the Israelites had returned to Judah from exile in Babylonia, trying to rebuild their houses and rebuild their temple worship. Many of their leaders (Ezra and Nehemiah) were emphasizing keeping their bloodline pure, preserving their identity amidst warring nations. As in other stories of ancient Israel, there was a famine in the land, and many Israelites left to seek places with more food (Recall that years earlier, with famine in the time of Jacob and Joseph, many fled to Egypt.) So during a famine, Naomi and her husband Elimelech leave Bethlehem in Judah, traveling to the East of the Dead Sea, to become immigrants in the land of Moab. (I'm sure you notice that I used the word immigrant, intentionally, so that we might keep in mind some universal overtones, how we can relate to the story with current immigration realities due to poverty and hunger.)

So Naomi is the foreigner, the immigrant, in the land of Moab, and there her husband Elimelech dies. Now she is a widow in a foreign land. Her two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, but her sons also die, and did not have any offspring. So Naomi is a widow and her two daughters-in-law are also widows, and there are no husbands or sons in the picture. Then, in ancient Israel (though it still may hold true sometimes now), women did find their security in their men and in having sons. Trying to make a long story short... Naomi decides to return to her homeland of Judah, and tells her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab to secure their future, which Orpah does, but Ruth loved her mother-in-law so much that she insists on going back to Bethlehem with Naomi, saying the famous words on the front of our bulletin: "Where you go, I'll go, Where you stay I will stay, and also the words Your people will be my people, and your God my God" (I'll now take the risk of being the foreigner, the

immigrant, and trust that I'll be welcomed.) Ruth is so loyal, so committed, willing to risk journeying to a new land and a new culture, a new faith. Ruth becomes a model of committed love for us.

We can also identify with Naomi, who had a really tough life, and at one point she asks her women friends to call her Mara meaning "bitter" rather than Naomi which means "my sweet one." Since women got their security through their husbands and sons, Naomi was in a really precarious position; her husband and sons had died, and she had no chance of having more sons. Naomi was a widow with little hope in the world. Life seemed very unfair, and like Job, she knew the mystery of suffering. But enter Ruth, who becomes the Grace in Naomi's life, Ruth, who becomes the "redemption" for Naomi.

The story is actually rather complex with regard to property and inheritances. In those times in Israel, widows could be "redeemed," restored, made whole by "next of kin".... so that a brother or perhaps a male relative could marry the widow and become responsible for the property and wealth of the deceased husband, and even give her children. Naomi introduces her daughter-in-law Ruth to her wealthy relative Boaz, who agrees to "redeem" or restore the family (protect the lineage and property of Elimelech) by marrying Ruth. Naomi, as the beloved mother-in-law, now essentially has a new family; Naomi is restored to a new security along with Ruth. Ruth is still of child-bearing age, so Ruth is able to conceive, bearing a son (further security) who continues the family for Naomi... the women of the neighborhood actually say "a son has been born to Naomi!" Ruth was known as a foreigner, a Moabite, but was accepted into this Jewish community, in spite of laws at there time not to intermarry with foreigners like Moabites, or Ammonites, or Canaanites. Ruth was exceptional, of course, for she had said to Naomi: Whither thou goest I will go, your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Out of love for Naomi, she even converted to Jewish faith.

The story of Ruth has stood the test of time as an important and timeless story of expansive and inclusive love! Like the Good Samaritan story that Jesus told, the heroine is a *foreigner*, who exemplifies amazing love and kindness. Much as we all love our own religion and need a particular path to follow, the Bible has many stories, like Ruth, about God working through surprising people. The story of Ruth reminds us to do all we can to welcome immigrants as God's children just as we are, who are seeking stability and security just as Naomi and Elimelech sought a new life in Moab and then Ruth the Moabite sought a new life in Bethlehem. The story shows us an example of a blessed intercultural, interfaith marriage that went against the grain of the Jewish purity concerns of that time... it is hard for many people to accept these days as well.

The end of the story shows the fruitful and blessed nature of Ruth's interfaith marriage. Ruth becomes the great grandmother of King David, the Messianic King, who becomes the ancestor of Jesus the Messiah. There are unlikely or surprising characters in the lineage of the Messiah; let's always keep in mind Ruth, the foreigner from the land of Moab. Ruth was a very progressive story for its time. As stated, the ancient Jewish laws, after returning from exile, had punishments and excommunications for marrying "foreign wives." Yet in the story, the women of Naomi's hometown are the initiators of this new kind of hospitality and welcome... not only welcoming Naomi back as a widow, but welcoming her beloved Moabite daughter-in-law, and honoring the marriage between her and Naomi's close kinsman Boaz, and then honoring the newborn son by naming him Obed, meaning servant, or servant of the Lord. The community of women is a big part of the redemption or restoration of Naomi; in mutual love, Ruth and Naomi both helped to restore each other. Truly Love and Grace do save!

It is the love between the two heroines, Naomi and Ruth which guides the story and redeems them, practically with property and

wealth, but more importantly with the feeling of acceptance, the welcome and hospitality that is cross-cultural, between Jews and Moabites. We know this same love and grace can guide us in our ability to love and welcome people who are different from ourselves. The book of Ruth reminds us to embrace our multicultural world, and the Good Samaritan story gives us the idea that we can think of the Good Syrian, the Good Muslim, the Good Mexican, the Good Afghan.

I always notice the scripture, written *large*, on the side of our local Jewish temple, from Leviticus Chapter 19: "Welcome the stranger or alien in your midst as if he or she were a citizen!" Such was Jesus' love, as the choir sang his words: "Come, Come unto me, all you who are weary." And that means ALL who are weary... It matters not your race or religion, All who are seeking safety, seeking food, seeking asylum from war, will always be welcome in communities following Jesus' Way. Let us be part of that witness, that hospitality, that welcome, in any way we can, talking with our brothers and sisters of faith, sharing efforts where we can. Amen.