

A Place in This World
Ruth 1:1-18
November 4, 2018
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A man, his wife and his mother-in-law went on vacation to the Holy Land. While they were there, the mother-in-law passed away. The undertaker told them, “You can have her shipped home for \$5,000, or you can bury her here in the Holy Land for \$150.” The man thought about it and told him he would just have her shipped home. The undertaker asked, “Why would you spend \$5,000 to ship your mother-in-law home, when it would be wonderful to have her buried here and spend only \$150?” The man replied, “a man died here 2,000 years ago, was buried here, and three days later he rose from the dead. I just can’t take that chance.”

Mother-in-laws get a bad wrap. The Pope in his 2015 visit to Philadelphia even made a mother-in-law joke, commenting on how Jesus was sent by God into a family and this is important because, “He said; families quarrel, and sometimes plates can fly, and children bring headaches, and I won’t speak about mother-in-laws.” to great laughter of the crowd. How many of you have mother-in-law issues? Don’t raise your hands, just say it with your eyes, because I know many of you are sitting next to or in the same vicinity as your mothers-in-law. Mothers have distinct relationships with their children that are formed over years. When a child gets married there enters into the relationship another person, a new presence to discover and try to understand, and it’s not always easy for mothers-in-law to form bonds with their new family members. Some people have very good relationships with their in-laws. I count myself as one of those! But some people have a lot of loss and heartache and hardship that surrounds mother-in-laws. One of my patients at the Cancer Institute was simply beside herself when her son got married. She claimed it was the girl herself who was the problem, but really, any woman would have been bad for her son because she interrupted their family unit. It was really hard to listen to her talk about their marriage and the extent of her loss of place in her son’s life because she was blind to the impact her attitude would have on their relationship. Sometimes in families we do throw plates, like the pope said, but there can also be moments of real light and life when two families come together. I can’t say for certain but I can guess from watching the life of Hope that many of the inter-marriages between families at this church have brought strengthened connections and friendships and not hindered it. And with the number of kids at Hope right now, who are building lifelong bonds, I can’t help but speculate there will more intermarriage in the future. Not saying who is going to get married, just that it might. This is the gift of marriage, it allows love the freedom to grow into new hearts and make new loving connections.

The theory of what it means to love and who we should love comes from the New Testament lesson this morning. Jesus issues the greatest commandment or what can be seen as the greatest challenge to all of us – love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself. It’s a beautiful passage, it’s an inspirational passage. And it’s simple, right, love. Love one another, love God, for through loving our neighbor we love God. Yes, it’s good stuff. It boils all the complicated things about life down to one simple principle – love. Poets, preachers and artists have repeated the command for centuries. In this past century many of us sung the anthem from the Beatles – all you need is love. It is a rallying cry for what we ALL need and what we ALL

should do. We can get behind the trombone in that song and sing – all we need is love. Did you know John Lennon was 26 when he wrote that line? 26. He was 24 when the Beatles landed in America and Paul McCartney was a mere 21. The power of love is formational and inspirational. Centuries earlier Jesus preached the same thing, without the horn section – it’s all about love. Simple love. But we make it quite complicated.

Our passage this morning in Ruth is just that – complicated. The book of Ruth is often referred to as a testimony of *chesed*. The Hebrew word translated as loving kindness. While Jesus tells us in Mark what the principle of love is, the book of Ruth models what it means to live in love for another person. I appreciate as well that this is a story of what it means to love illuminating the female experience. Women and their ability to love is often objectified and reduced by society. Men especially like to put the love of a woman into a box. Meaning women love like this. But it’s not that simple. The way that women are with each other is actually quite beautiful and complex. Women tend to have many relationships that flourish on many different levels. Women love out of dependence, out of obligation, out of friendship, out of sexuality, out of delight, and they love out of devotion and desire. Just to name a few ways. Most relevant to our story today is the love between women that is intimate and non-erotic. Naomi and Ruth are intimate, they share their lives together. So much so that Naomi is able to instruct Ruth later on how to seduce Boaz. I must confess, my relationship with my mother-in-law is not that intimate. In our passage, Ruth’s speech to Naomi is one of bonding and unity, it is so strong and overwhelming, almost hyperbolic so that Ruth is made weak by it. Naomi cannot respond in kind to Ruth because she is overcome. There is nothing left to discuss or argue about. Love conquers Naomi’s will to refuse her. So they go back to Judah.

It is believed that the book of Ruth was probably written after the Babylonian exile. When it was written gives us clues as to why it was written. Under this over-arching framework of the Babylonian exile; it is a treatise on hospitality, welcome and integration. Ruth and Naomi model what it is to join lives of different nationalities together. It can also be seen as propaganda to encourage the Israelites to cross cultural lines and marry outside of their own nation in order to perpetuate the race. Almost seamlessly Ruth and Naomi join together, they help each other, they grieve together, they flee together, they cling to one another. Their solidarity and unity, their bondedness leads to their redemption. Their story proves that cultures can unite, heal and flourish. It is also the most fitting text for a time when our country wrestles with understanding immigration, the rights of citizenship, and cross-cultural engagement.

The cross-cultural engagement of Ruth begins with the very first acknowledgment that a man from Bethlehem went to live in Moab. Bethlehem is in Judah or modern-day Palestine. Moab is in Jordan. The man, Elimelech, and his wife Naomi and their sons are foreigners in Moab. Until this point in the story there had always been strife between Moab and Judah. Moabites were the descendants of Lot’s incestual relationship with his daughters. So these were disgraceful people in eyes of the Israelites. When the family established residency in Moab they are immigrants in a foreign land. They establish themselves there and “take” wives from the Moabites, which is another step in the cross-cultural journey. And things go from bad to worse. There is a famine, people die, Elimelech and his sons die. Naomi is left with her two daughters-in-law. Naomi is a widow in a foreign land where there are few resources and no safety nets. And so, we begin the story of women seeking refuge.

I cannot separate the experience of Ruth and Naomi and even Orpah from the immigrant experience of today. What does it take to leave your home and go? Is it exhaustion? Is it fear? Or is something more beautiful and powerful than that, like love? Do you love life so much that you

cannot face another day in hell?

I hope that our hearts are moved by the migrant caravan coming this way. Looking at the pictures of the people in that caravan, I do not see anything that resembles aggression and violence. I know some news outlets portray the migrant caravan as opportunistic people, seeking entry into our country to do evil deeds. But what I see is people. Human beings walking, carrying children, attempting to eat and sleep. Perhaps having a moment to bathe in a river and maybe laughing in community. Men, women & children walking, trekking forward with reason and purpose. They are people on a journey for a better life, escaping trauma, hoping for asylum; not out to get us. I hope that we all understand that no one leaves their home and journeys like that on foot or on boat, like those escaping Syria, unless they are compelled to go. After all, what would it take for you to leave your home? Many celebrities talked a good game before the 2016 elections but not many of them actually moved to Canada. Even now with the many warning signals going off about where this country is headed, most of us don't have our bags packed. Why? Because we don't really feel threatened, we haven't lost enough, we are desperate enough. Famine, warfare, a lack of security, loneliness, desperation; these are the conditions of Naomi & Ruth; these are conditions for migrants and refugees today. So I ask again, what would it take for you to leave your home and your life behind?

What it would take to leave depends on what is being left behind? Naomi and Ruth were leaving behind a sense of nothingness. The land of Moab was a place of grief and loss. As two women alone, they could not have made it in Moab by themselves. What would have happened is that Ruth would have been married off to someone else, if possible, and she and Naomi would have been separated. Their lives would have been destitute and separate. They left because they had a spark of hope that they could stay together, that they could make a life together in a different place. They heard stories of a place where they could be welcomed, where they could belong. Migrants today share similar experiences. They maintain the hope that there is a better life out there somewhere, perhaps in America.

In this world, especially in Latin America, there is much violence. In fact, it is actually a risk factor to be born male. With all the emphasis on reinforcing feminism today, we must not forget that all of us are at risk for violence in this world. Violence between men is a worldwide problem. And the consequences of that violence are felt mostly by women and children. The statistics are that 80% of the homicides committed in this world are committed by men. In Latin America 50% of men 20 years of age will not live past the age of 31. 50% of men. Due to violence. This is what the people flee. This is what it means to lose. And while these are statistics regarding men, the ramifications are high. Women will be made vulnerable by this. Women will grieve their husbands, their lovers, their brothers and their children. They will fear for the safety of their children and themselves. Women and children will be left alone and vulnerable to even more violence. Their husbands and support systems will disappear due to violence and they will not be able to work because there will be no work, no economy to contribute to. So to set out for a different/better life and to find a place to live, and hopefully thrive, is the point of leaving. It's not that hard to understand why they choose to go. Their joy will become bitterness.

Naomi was in her own personal hell after all. She was grieving the loss of the men she cared about. Men, in whose society, she was an object to be handed off to someone else. An object to be married off. Her suffering is extensive. Some have called Naomi the female Job. Even in the passage after ours she asks that her name be change from Naomi to Mara meaning bitterness. She repeats more than once that God has treated her harshly. Until the very end of the story of Ruth, Naomi lives into her bitterness.

The only thing that comforts her, the only thing that sustains her is *chesed*. *Chesed* is about loving kindness towards one another. It's important to note that in our passage God does not speak directly. Humans are left to deal with the ramifications of loss. Humans are left to figure out the order of life. We bear witness to the life of women lived together. The struggle for connectedness and place. And yet, there is hope here. Naomi wants to spare Orpah her suffering and Orpah returns to her people. Ruth stays. It is not out of obligation. Love is not an obligation for her. Ruth must generally like Naomi. Otherwise like Orpah she would be free to return to her people. Maybe death enabled this to happen. They bond over loss and shared grief through their relationship. Loss can be like this. We want to hold on to someone who knew what we knew. The people who knew us before our losses. Reading this passage economically is an oversimplification of what is happening here. Yes, they need each other for survival. But survival is one thing, to thrive is another. And when they return to Judah they thrive.

In a post-exilic world the need of the writers of this book was to establish hope that people from another walk of life could be friendly, could be not-scary. Could be helpful and true friendship. The lineage of Judaism could thrive through non-Israelite lines for remember Ruth is a Moabite. And she and Boaz give birth to Obed, who becomes the father of Jesse and then to David down the lineage to Jesus. She, a foreign woman, has the power to assist the bringing of the Messiah into the world. Hope is real.

As a chaplain, I get asked a lot about how I deal with people of different cultural and religious backgrounds. My answer is simple, we all want the same things really. Like Maslow's hierarchy, we want to be safe, we want to belong, and we want food, drink, and shelter. In that same line of thought, how we belong and how we are safe is similar across all cultures, it involves being loved and having the freedom to love. When I talk to moms of Middle Eastern descent they have the same complaints as my friends, as you women here do. Their husbands don't do what they want them to do, their kids don't pick up their toys, nor do they listen. They complain about homework and school problems. We are all the same people, no matter what language we speak, where we come from, what clothes we wear, and even the God we serve. Because as long as it took for you to get your kid into the car today to get to church, it took some mom in Orland Park just as long to get her kid to the Mosque, or another mom to go to Temple on Sabbath, or another mom to go to the Hindu Temple.

Jesus is clear over and over again, it is about loving our neighbors. A few weeks ago in the lectionary the disciples argued over who got to sit next to Jesus in heaven on his right and on his left. And Jesus said to them, that's not for me to decide, that's for God to decide in glory. It is not our business to decide who deserves our love. We are called to love our neighbor, just as we love God.

Would we not give God water if God were thirsty? Would we not give God shelter, should God be cold? What would you not do for God? Nothing. So what would you not do for your neighbor? And your neighbor is not just the person next to you, not just your mother-in-law, not just the person who lives down the street. It is the person in the migrant caravan, it is the person alone and lonely in prison, it is the Syrian father on the beach over the body of his dead four-year-old son. These are our neighbors. These are the people we are called to love.

So how will you love them? Will we meet the migrant caravan with violence or resentment in our hearts? Will we trade a bullet for a rock? What if Naomi and Ruth were in that caravan? Naomi and Ruth demonstrate the bond of love. It is obligation and it is pleasure. It is what God asks, nay, what God commands. To love. To hold one another. To cling to one another. Love the immigrant, the refugee in your midst. See ourselves as one. You love yourself

enough to stay in this place, but will you love the refugee enough to welcome them. Here comes a Spoiler Alert: There is a scene in the first season of “The Handmaids Tale” when the character Moira played by Samira Wiley, makes it out of Gideon into New America (somewhere in Canada) fleeing the oppression of where she came from and she is welcomed with open arms, with food, with clothes, a hot shower, compassion, and a fulfilling of needs. It’s almost too much for her, she is speechless. But she only breaks down when she sees someone she knows, because there she finds her place, she finds belonging and true welcome of attachment. Hospitality is simple. People are complicated but welcoming them is easy. We welcome when we recognize what we need and extend it to others. When we see a need and we fill it. Or even when we attempt to show love, though the other may not receive it the same. When you offer a glass of water to someone who is thirsty it is love and hospitality. When you give to the homeless or to ministries that need donations, you are showing love to God and neighbor. Each time you smile at a child, you show hospitality. When we open our hearts, our lives, our doors, our wallets we offer placement to those in need. We all have a place, we are all part of the grand plan. There is enough space, enough resources for all of us in this world, in this life. May we all find a home/heart in which to belong. For our place in this world is with God and one another. May we all find our place in this world. Amen.