

Today we are exploring the land owner who married the immigrant woman. This is the story of Naomi first, followed by Ruth and it concludes with the inclusion of Boaz. The book of Ruth is only four chapters long and this short book is wedged in the Bible between the books of Judges and I Samuel. It tells the story of Naomi, her husband, and two sons as they migrate from Israel to the land of Moab. The reason stated for the move is that there is a famine in Israel. This all takes place about 1,100 years before the time of Jesus, some 3,100 years ago.

In the book of Ruth we see a number of people with open and loving hearts. Living life with a good heart is our theme for worship this week. This summer our studies of the heroes and heroines of the Hebrew scripture have revealed special qualities to us. First, we saw the strength of Deborah, then the hope of Ezekiel, the witness of Micah and last week the power of Moses. Today it is the heart of Ruth.

While Naomi and her family were initially in Moab they all experience joy but it is short lived. They seemingly find food and a good livelihood in Moab as they settle down. As time moves on each son marries a woman from Moab and life is good.

Then unbelievable sorrow visits Naomi’s life as her husband dies. If that is not enough to handle she then has one of her sons die. Then this is followed by the other son dying. Who could bear such loss? The biblical text shares that Naomi feels cursed by God. After all her loss that feeling is understandable.

There was no social safety-net for a widow in a foreign land in Biblical times so Naomi decides to return to Israel. She has heard that the famine has passed and she hopes that her extended family might help her out when she returns. With a broken but caring heart Naomi tells her daughters-in-law that it is probably best that they stay in Moab, their homeland, because their prospects for family support or re-marriage would be much better there. One daughter-in-law takes her advice and returns to her family.

Yet, her other daughter-in-law, Ruth, refuses to part from Naomi. From the depths of her heart Ruth makes a pledge to stay at Naomi’s side. This vow, from the heart, is probably the most remembered part of the entire book. It is in chapter one, verses 16-17.

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

Therefore Naomi and her daughter-in-law return to Israel. Ruth, who is young and able bodied, goes in the fields to glean. She goes out into the fields with other folk who have little or nothing to live on. They are allowed to pick the leftovers in the fields after the crops are harvested.

The Law of Moses, given by God, mandates that all land owners in Israel allow gleaning of their fields. The Law instructs land owners to leave some of the crops behind so the destitute in society have a source of food. God reminds the land owners to have a heart for the poor. God reminds the Israelites that they were once an immigrant people and therefore they are to provide for the widow, the orphan, and foreigner in their midst. They are to have caring and generous hearts.

We hear that message here at St. Paul UMC as well. We are to have a heart for the immigrant. St. Paul has shown its heart by hosting two immigrant families as they arrived in Omaha and settled in. St. Paul has shown its heart by inviting two refugee congregations to use our building for worship. A Burundian congregation from central Africa worships each Sunday afternoon in Wesley Hall and a Bhutan congregation from the Himalaya mountain range worships each Sunday afternoon in the Fellowship Hall. St. Paul has shown its heart with the development of B.A.R.T., the Benson Area Refugee Taskforce, that provides for the ongoing needs of refugees in the Benson area.

God reminds the Israelites in the book of Ruth that they were once an immigrant people and therefore they are to provide for the widow, the orphan, and foreigner in their midst. They are to have a caring and generous heart. We hear that message as well.

Let's take a time for sharing. After you greet one another (pass the peace of Christ) I invite to sit down with one or two other people and share where your ancestors lived before migrating to America. Please share the time period that happened if you know.

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God reminds each of us that live in Omaha that our ancestors were once an immigrant people to America and therefore we are to have a heart for the immigrants in our day.

Let's return to our lesson. Boaz, the owner of the field that Ruth gleans in, takes notice of her. He sees Ruth attending to the basics in life by gleaning the fields. It is interesting that as we attend to the basics in life that seems to lay the foundation for good things to happen. No guarantee but it provides the possibility for goodness to emerge. Second, Boaz sees that Ruth shows initiative in her work. We read that "she has been on her feet from early this morning...without resting for a moment."

These qualities found in Ruth impress Boaz as he gives her some preferential treatment and also seems to open his heart to her as well. One thing leads to the next which results in Boaz, the land owner, marrying Ruth, the immigrant woman. Their hearts come together. This provides her with security and she leaps from a state of poverty to one of privilege.

Their marriage is not only a blessing to Boaz and Ruth but our lesson indicates it is a deep blessing for Naomi as well. The birth of their boy, Obed, is a healing balm for Naomi. She is a very proud grandmother as the text tells us she became his nurse.

This boy, Obed, born from the union of the wealthy land owner and the immigrant woman is a link to one of the greatest figures in the Hebrew scripture. Did you notice that? The son of Boaz and Ruth, Obed, eventually becomes the father of Jesse, who eventually becomes the father of David, the greatest king in Israel's history. Please remember that King David is a link in the genealogy leading to Jesus.

Please see that when we have large and loving hearts like Boaz and Ruth did that the results can go beyond our wildest dreams. They not only had caring hearts but they were part of the family tree leading to the birth of Jesus.

Migration and immigration have been part and parcel of the human experience since the beginning of time. It happens to be a hot-button issue in America today and throughout most of the Europe as well. As with all issues, it is good to look to our faith to help us in our understanding and reaction to divisive social issues like immigration.

As we grapple with issues in our larger lives it is healthy to remember that it is human lives and not just statistics that are being addressed. Ruth and Boaz provide a human touch to the immigration story. Migration issues are historic and present day and we need to prayerfully consider our thoughts and actions in light of our faith. When we do so our hearts will lead us in the actions that God desires for us. We celebrate the faithful and caring heart of Ruth and we pray that God continues to fill our hearts with love. Amen.