

## OT STORIES

**Ruth & Immigration**Ruth 1:22-2:13; Pat Cameron; July 11, 2010

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“Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?” Ruth the Moabite, asks of Boaz, the Israelite. Ruth, an immigrant from the land of Moab, is surprised how well she is being treated in a foreign land. Treating immigrants well, “welcoming the stranger,” is a particularly relevant theme for this congregation in our emphasis on immigration as our primary expression of the spiritual discipline of peacemaking. An immigrant story, the book of Ruth has much to offer.

In the scripture that we read this morning, the story picks up where Naomi “returns” to Bethlehem, accompanied by her daughter-in-law, Ruth. We also read that they arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Naomi is returning with a daughter-in-law from Moab, suggesting that Moab is where they have been living. The reference to the barley harvest is significant, because the reason Naomi had left Bethlehem to live in Moab is because there was famine in the land. Now, the harvest is plentiful, allowing Naomi to return with one of her two Moabite daughter-in-laws willing to immigrate to a foreign land.

When Naomi had left Bethlehem to live in Moab during the famine, she went with her husband, Elimelech. Naomi bore two sons before he died; and both of her sons married Moabite women. Her two sons had also died, leaving all three women widows. After ten years of residing in Moab, the news came that the famine was over in the land of the Israelites, and Naomi and her two daughters-in-law planned

to live there together. Trying to discourage them from leaving their homeland, one daughter-in-law, Oprah (not really—her name is *Orpah*) decided to stay, but Ruth was willing to leave all she knew behind to stay by Naomi's side. She said to her mother-in-law:

Where you go, I will go;  
Where you lodge, I will lodge  
your people will be my people,  
and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)

So the two widows, Naomi and Ruth, one returning to her home, and the other an outsider, an immigrant, enter Bethlehem at the time of the barley harvest. They own no share of this harvest, though, because they own no land. But Naomi has connections—Boaz, a relative of Elimelech, identified in Ch. 2, v1 as a “prominent rich man.” In a time when one's wealth was equivalent to how much land one owned, this means that Boaz owns a lot of land.

Even though a foreigner, Ruth, knows of the Israelite practice “gleaning,” in which poor people could follow behind the reapers and pick up the grain they left behind. So she follows the reapers on Boaz' land. Having travelled from Bethlehem to see how the harvest was coming along, Boaz notices Ruth and inquires of his servant, “To whom does this young woman belong?” In a patriarchal society like ancient Israel, women were seen as property, so Boaz is asking what man owns Ruth. But the servant responds to a different question—where did she come from?—and tells Boaz that she is a Moabite who came back with Naomi.

Coming face-to-face with Boaz, Ruth must feel that she ought to get his permission for the gleaning she has already been doing on his land. Boaz observes that Ruth is a hard worker: “...she has been on her feet from early this morning until now, without resting even for a moment.” Boaz gives her permission to follow the

young women reapers and assures her protection from the young men he has hired. To his kindness, Ruth responds, “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?”

One wonders whether Boaz would have been so kind had Ruth not been identified with her mother-in-law and Boaz’ relative, Naomi. After all, Ruth was a Moabite.

The biblical perspective on Moab was mixed. In Deuteronomy 23:24 and Judges 11:17, Moab is condemned for being inhospitable to the Israelites when they were traveling in the wilderness. On the other hand, in Deuteronomy 2:9, the Israelites are warned not to harass Moab because it is the land that was given to Lot (“Moab,” in *Oxford Companion to the Bible*).

But this reference to Moab as Lot’s land isn’t entirely favorable to Moab. In the Genesis 13 story when Abram and Lot divide the land between them, Lot chooses land that includes the wicked city of Sodom. Now, in Deuteronomy 2:9, the land that Lot acquired is identified as Moab. Abram, on the other hand, gets the land of Canaan which the Israelites have re-claimed. So even this relatively favorable reference to Moab in Deut 2:9 suggests, at the least, that the Moabites are not as favored by God as the Israelites.

With the references to Moab in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as one of the foreign influences that the Jews should get rid of, the overwhelming evidence suggests that Moabites were not welcome in the land of Israel. No wonder Ruth was puzzled at Boaz’ kindness: “Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?”

Boaz' response to Ruth's query seems to suggest that he is able to overcome whatever prejudices he may have had toward Moab and Moabites. First, he tells her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me..." Again, it is the connection with the native-born Naomi that gives Ruth her credibility. But then, Boaz displays genuine empathy with the plight of immigrants, as he goes on to say to Ruth that he also knows "...how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." Finally, we see that Boaz' view of God is of a God who blesses not only Israelites but foreigners like Ruth: "May the Lord reward you for your deeds and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge."

In gratitude for Boaz's kindness, Ruth responds, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not your servant." As an immigrant, Ruth considers herself lower than one of Boaz's servants, yet Boaz has elevated her status by treating her as well as he treats his servants.

The book of Ruth is a novella, a short novel. Even though the Christian Bible places it among the historical books of the Old Testament, it is a story; but a story with a moral purpose. It may have been first told, as its opening verse suggests, "In the days when the judges ruled," or it may have been created later on, during the monarchy, before the Babylonian exile.

How would the first listeners to Ruth's story have understood it? Besides being entertaining (we're not going to talk about the sex scenes in the book), the original moral to the story may have been simply "be kind to the foreigners in your midst, because God blesses them too." It may have provided a alternative perspective from

the stories of judges and kings whose power was maintained by fighting foreigners, not being kind to them.

Even though the story of Ruth had been told years earlier, perhaps by professional story-tellers, it was probably edited and shaped into its final, written form after the Exile, during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. A chronology at the end linking Boaz' lineage to King David, seems to have been a later addition to the original story. The book of Ruth would have provided a needed corrective to Ezra's and Nehemiah's campaign against foreign wives and all other foreign influences among the Jewish people. In this context, the book of Ruth suggested that, not only were immigrants valuable assets to the Jews, they were linked, through Boaz and Ruth, to the much-revered King David! According to the chronology, David, the greatest King of Israel, was the great-grandson of an immigrant!

How might we understand Ruth today, especially in light of this church's commitment to be welcoming toward foreigners and immigrants? First of all, how do we regard our neighbor to the south, Mexico?

Like the relationship between Israel and Moab, the history of U.S.-Mexican relations is a mixed one. We once fought wars against Mexico. Today, most citizens in this country would regard the Mexico as a friend, not an enemy. But one wonders about our government's regard for Mexico, given policies that are harmful to its people.

Ratified by the United States Senate over 16 years ago, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was touted as an economic boon to its partners: Mexico, Canada and the U.S. Barriers to trade were to be lifted for most exports

and imports, resulting in lower prices and thus, greater wealth for the citizens of all three partner nations.

But according to an article entitled “NAFTA’s Promise Unfulfilled,” published in the March 23 edition of the *New York Times*, after 15 years of NAFTA,

Mexico’s exports have exploded under NAFTA, quintupling to \$292 billion last year, but Mexico is still exporting people too, almost half a million each year, seeking opportunities in the United States that they do not have at home. . . . In some cases, NAFTA produced results that were exactly the opposite of what was promised. For instance, domestic industries were dismantled as multinationals imported parts from their own suppliers. Local farmers were priced out of the market by food imported tariff-free. Many Mexican farmers simply abandoned their land and headed north. (Malkin, Elizabeth, “NAFTA’s Promise Unfulfilled, *New York Times*, March 23, 2009).

NAFTA has increased migration across the U.S.-Mexican border. As famine drove Ebimelech and Naomi to seek refuge in Moab, Mexican immigrants are risking their lives, seeking refuge from hunger and poverty. Yet rather than own up to misguided and unfair policies that have contributed to the economic hardships of the Mexican people, our government started building a 700-mile fence to keep Mexicans out. Fortunately, that project is now on hold, at least for the foreseeable future. We need to mend fences with Mexico’s people, not build them.

Sweeping changes in the way our government relates to Mexico are needed. Now that President Obama has lifted the silence about the need for immigration reform, we can become informed and contribute our ideas to the national debate. We have time to get prepared. The debate is not going to be resolved in an election year. We have the time to read about and discuss such topics as the history of U.S.-Mexico relations, our nation’s current policies and practices that impact Mexico for good or for ill, and what changes are needed. The Mission and Service committee will be providing articles on these and other topics over the coming months.

Second, how does our understanding of Ruth's story inform how we treat immigrants today? Like modern-day immigrations, it was hard on Ruth to leave Moab and migrate to a foreign land. But in many ways, Ruth had it better than many current immigrants. She was accompanied by an Israelite, someone who had already briefed her on what to expect in this foreign land. Having lived in both Israel and Moab, Naomi understood both her own culture and that of Ruth, serving as a bridge between the two. Naomi also had family connections and knew that if she and Ruth could get on Boaz's good side, he would provide for them. She had what she needed to help her adjust to her new situation.

Many of the immigrants who come across our southern border have left family behind, have little understanding of this foreign culture, and may not get connected with other immigrant communities to provide physical and emotional support before they are picked up, detained, and eventually deported, or die in the desert on their way to the Promised Land.

How can we be Naomi and Boaz for immigrants who lack the same degree of support that Ruth had? In the role of Naomi, we can accompany immigrants as they try to bridge the cultural gap between their nation of origin and the United States. In the role of Boaz, we can offer empathy, compassion and resources to immigrants who have many financial, emotional, and spiritual needs. We don't have to go to the border to play these roles. Naomi, Boaz, and Ruth are represented in the immigrant community and their supporters right here in Wichita.

Finally, the book of Ruth informs our work on immigration policy, and our relationships with immigrant people by the nature of the book itself. It is a story. Ruth's story invites us to find our place in the biblical story of a people--once

immigrants themselves—as they struggle with how to welcome the strangers, the foreigners, the immigrants in their midst.

This story of an ancient people hasn't ended yet. We continue to proclaim it and live it today. It is our story too.