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November 12, 2006 Sermon
Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17

God's Genealogy

Let us pray

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight Oh God, My strength and my redeemer.

As we consider our text today, I am reminded of the first lesson in our study group, "Living the Questions." It is entitled, "Invitation to Journey, the role of biblical authority." The lesson begins with a thorough overview of what the Bible entails. It says, "As a record of various peoples experience of God's faithfulness and human infidelities, the Bible is full of colorful characters, lying, cheating, sex, hate, war, betrayal, murder, sex, letters, poetry, history, sex, great ideas, lousy ideas and more sex.

Now that I have your attention, we can turn to our Scripture passage for today and explore what meaning this scandalously written passage could have for us today. This passage from the Book of Ruth has caused much controversy in feminist movements, and among scholars the most heated debates concerning the interpretation of the book of Ruth revolve around this scene on the threshing floor. Indeed, this scene can lead one to all types of imaginations and speculations about what is really happening. If you take this passage out of context with the rest of the story it reads like a tryst between mutually consenting adults as may be found in a soap opera or a common romance novel. If you take your imagination further you can imagine the needy young Ruth forcing herself to

relate to a rich old man for the sake of her mother-in-law, or a scheming Ruth cooperating with her mother-in-law to compromise the wealthy bachelor of the community into marriage. The question is why this passage is included in the text. It could be certainly for reasons of good narrative art for without this passage the level of drama in the story would be greatly diminished.¹ Although all of these suggestions for this passage have been argued by many, I believe that the meaning of this passage plays a central role in the narrative. Let us take a journey together into the book of Ruth and find the deeper and significant meaning of this passage for us and our world today.

The book of Ruth begins with a man from Judah, Elimelech, who flees his country, with his wife Naomi and his two sons Maholn and Kilion, to Moab, in response to a devastating famine. While in Moab, Elimelech's two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Elimelech and his two sons die in Moab, leaving Naomi widowed along with her two daughters-in-law. Try to imagine the devastation and fear that engulfed these women. For without husbands these women had no security or standing in society. Naomi, whose bitterness begins to consume her, takes her two daughters-in-law and leaves the country of Moab and begins her journey back to the land of Judah. Naomi realizes, during the journey, that she is unable to care for her two daughter-in-laws and that they will have no opportunity to marry and be secure in Judah due to their outsider status as Moabites. Naomi pleads with Ruth and Orpah to go back to their respective families and re-marry. Upon such a plea, Orpah returned home. However, Ruth makes her famous vow to Naomi. It's that beautiful passage in the Book of Ruth beginning with the words, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you

¹ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, ed. James Luther Mays, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999).

go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." With great loyalty and commitment Ruth remains with Naomi. Despite Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, and her God, she is ignored by Naomi and the town's women in Bethlehem. Ruth is still designated a foreigner and described throughout the story as the Moabite woman.

In order to survive for both herself and Naomi she claims the right of the poor in Israelite law, to glean the edges of the fields for food. To glean essentially means to pick up the leftovers once the field has been cleared. Ruth is working in the section that belongs to Boaz, who was of the family of Elimelech. Boaz comes into the field to check on the progress of the work that is being done. The first thing that he does is address his workers with words of blessing. He sees Ruth who he does not recognize. Boaz does not speak to Ruth directly, nor ask her name or where she comes from. He asks who she belongs to. Although asking a question in this way sounds harsh to our ears, Boaz is simply inquiring what her family connections are, wondering whose wife, daughter or servant she might be, which reflects the patriarchal attitudes of the time. Perhaps Boaz alone, in contrast to Naomi, appreciates Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law. Boaz then speaks to Ruth offering protection. When Ruth asks Boaz why she has found favor in his sight, Boaz answers her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before." He then bestows a blessing upon her. Boaz does not ask anything of Ruth. Boaz is portrayed as a kind and up right man in the narrative. Ruth tells Naomi of her encounter with Boaz and this brings us to the next event, which is our Scripture passage for today.

In what seems like a conniving and manipulative action, Naomi instructs Ruth to go to Boaz and essentially seduce him into having sex with her, presuming that this action will result in a marriage between Ruth and Boaz. Ruth compliantly tells Naomi, "All that you tell me I will do." It is interesting that here we have women making their own decisions and taking action on their own in the context of the socio-economic structure of a patriarchal society. They do this in order to survive. We do not know if the relationship between Boaz and Ruth was consummated at that time, but we do know that Boaz does not take offense and indeed proceeds through the legal channels to marry Ruth.

At this point, the question we need to ask is how the situations of Naomi and Ruth in this story correspond to our world today. Who in this world is forced by circumstances beyond their control to glean what they can from the bounty of others? Who in our world has no choice but to live on what is left over after those in control of the basic resources for life have taken everything they want or need? A "widow" in our society today is not merely a woman who has lost her husband but, anyone in our society, male or female, who has to rely on the charitable whims of others for food and shelter. If, during the time of Ruth and Naomi Israel had an official "immigration policy" undoubtedly Ruth, the Moabite woman, would have been listed as an undesirable element. Who in our society today corresponds to a "Moabite."²

Today there are many ongoing debates over immigration laws. People in this country often feel overburdened by the presence of foreigners in their midst -- even if these outsiders profess allegiance to our country and God, as Ruth did to Naomi. Even if

² Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, "The Book of Ruth," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).

these people work hard and do the work that none of us are willing to do. For example, the immigrants who come over the border to pick our fruits and vegetables, often, working in dismal conditions and using the labor of their whole family, so that we may have food. They do not receive health care and their children do not receive an education. Then there are the immigrants who clean our houses, wait on us in large corporate stores, and work in sweat shops making clothes for us, most often working at, or below the minimum wage. Who of us today could survive on the minimum wage?

Sometimes out of desperation and a need to survive, the people who are considered the foreigners often do things that we feel are, and we judge as, morally reprehensible, just as the Israelites may have judged Ruth and Naomi for conniving to seduce Boaz. It is perhaps the narrator's aim at this point in the story to portray Ruth as the foreigner, who comes and commits sins before God, in a society in which she has no place, thus contaminating the society at large.

We have illegal immigrants in our society. Some may feel that immigrants contaminate our society. But let us look at why they come. Many come because they are seeking a better life or are, at the most basic level, seeking to survive by migrating from one place to another in order to avoid starvation, violence, violation of human rights and never ending war. When people have no options they take advantage of whatever possibilities are available in order to survive. How many times have we heard the conviction of those who leave their homeland that they will trust in God to see them through the arduous journey. "Theirs is of necessity a 'theology of survival.'" ³

Consider our own ancestry. My grandparents, on my mother's side, came from the southern regions of Italy, escaping war and poverty. My father's family came from

³ Sakenfeld.

Ireland during the potato famine just as Naomi's family left their homeland due to famine. Many of you have parents and grandparents who came to this country seeking relief from poverty, violence and pursuing the ideal of a better life for them and their families. You may remember hearing the stories from them about how difficult it was and the many societal and political obstacles they had to overcome once they were here.

Turning back to our story and the most important passage of the scripture today, we can see that Boaz and Ruth were married and the Lord intervened and "made her conceive." Ruth bore a son, a gift from God. The women of the town who previously shunned Ruth and Naomi now turn to Naomi and say "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him..... The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David."

As we know Jesus is descended from the line of David. Ruth is part of the ancestry of Jesus. So we may ask; in whom does God plant the seed of redemption? Throughout the Bible, God often chooses those of low station, the outcast, the sinner, the foreigner; to carry the seeds of the future. Ruth is blessed by the intervention of God. If God chooses Ruth without judgment and bestows a blessing upon her, then we must realize that we are not called upon to judge others. Judgment belongs to God not us. When we judge others without consideration of our moral responsibility to love our neighbors, then we ignore our commitment to the teachings of Jesus. It is up to us as a Christian community to nurture the well being of all people. If we strive to this goal to

put aside our judgments and welcome the foreigner in our midst then we too shall be redeemed, as were Naomi and Ruth, and with redemption comes God's grace for us all.

Amen