

West Branch Friends Meeting  
August 4, 2019  
Sue McCracken, Pastor  
“Ruth – A Story with a Purpose”

Here’s a quick question for you....how many Bibles do you have in your home? I think at last count I currently have six, and I can think of several others from my past that are no longer in my possession.

When my sisters and I were going through Mom’s apartment after her passing, we found two Bibles from **their** ancestors, and at least three or four others. We asked the grandkids if they were interested in any of them (they really weren’t), and we girls didn’t really want them, either, although I did say I would keep the two old ones containing a bit of genealogy and put them in the ‘family treasures’ tote that as the eldest, I would be responsible to keep.

There have been times I have diligently read through the entire Bible, highlighting passages I thought were important. There have been new translations, like The Living Bible, and The Message, that I wanted to read in the hopes of shedding a little different light on scripture verses with more modern English. But the more I’ve explored the scriptures through the study of historical theologians I respect, the more I realize how many different ways of reading and interpreting scriptures that there are.

Of course a majority of the books in the Bible were created by Jewish authors, who wanted to get the oral traditions printed so those who were not literate (a majority of the ancient people) could hear the scriptures written on scrolls that were read by the priests in the temple. From those reading came a rabbinic tradition that says the scriptures have seventy faces so that when you read them, you keep turning them in your mind like the facets of a gem, letting the light refract through the various faces in new and unexpected ways. What helps me do that is by reading theologians who have studied a variety of those faces of scripture by digging into the times, the history, and the cultures of the Jewish (and eventually Christian) nations. And what I keep discovering, is that I am finding more and more ways in which even though we may be much more literate and advanced today, we are still people whose

actions and beliefs are in many ways often similar to those of the ancient people!

So today I want to take a look at one of the Old Testament books, Ruth, viewing it in one of those different faces, noting the implications for us today. John Shelby Spong and Rob Bell are the authors providing this glimpse at a different way of considering this scripture; the familiar story of Ruth.

The setting? The Jewish people have been captured by the Moabites, their temple leveled and the wall around Jerusalem – believed to be God’s protection for them – destroyed. Every time a new Jewish ruler tries to get things back in order for the people, it fails. Bottom line? Every Jewish adult who has ever been in captivity, is afraid that his or her very life is in danger of being wiped out.

Here’s a fact of history that we need to keep track of: the Moabites are ancestors of Moab, Lot’s son. Remember how many years before, Abraham and his nephew, Lot, had both gotten too powerful without enough land for all their livestock, and they decided to go their separate ways? Keep that in mind because now their offspring are enemies: Moabites versus Jews.

What if this is a story, not meant to be taken literally, but written to make a point.? In fact, in The Message the story even begins “Once Upon a Time.” In a nutshell, here’s how the familiar story goes.

A Moabite man (Lot’s clan) named Elimelech has a Jewish wife (Abraham’s clan) named Naomi (Remember the history?!). The Moabites have captured the Jews and carted them off to their land and over the years, marriages between the two groups have taken place. These two, Elimelech and Naomi, have two sons in this story, who marry two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Tragically, the story’s author has Elimelech and both boys die, leaving mother-in-law Naomi with the responsibility to provide for her two daughter-in-laws. Naomi says she has no choice for her survival but to return to her Jewish family in Judah, but she tells the girls they should probably go live with their Moabite families.

One daughter goes, Orpah, one daughter, Ruth, doesn't want to leave Naomi and we have this familiar verse from Ruth 1:16, still used today in movies and even weddings.

***“And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.”***

To get to the heart of the story, the Naomi and Ruth return to Judah and settle in the fields of a distant relative, Boaz. Here's an interesting piece of this story – Jewish law! Leviticus 19: 9-10

***“When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. <sup>10</sup> Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.”***

Ruth is a good worker, staying late every day to pick up the grain that's been left, and she – a Moabite - gains the respect of the Jewish folks there. BUT – Naomi is concerned that as she gets older and there will be no one to care for her, what's going to happen to the two of them? So she comes up with a plan for Ruth to get Boaz pretty tipsy on wine at end of the local harvest festival, then Naomi instructs Ruth to basically seduce him.

The next morning, Naomi reminds Boaz of another Jewish law that requires the nearest kin to care for the widow of his deceased relative. Boaz, wanting to fulfill the law to care for this widowed relative, Naomi, marries Ruth and they have a son, Obed. And the story abruptly ends.

But we have to know a bit more of the later history to understand the purpose of this story. Eventually after the Jews were able to conquer those terrible Moabites who had been so ruthless with them, the Jewish leaders decided the only way they could keep themselves from being captured again, would be to purge anyone whose bloodlines were not purely Jewish.

Now the plot thickens! Ruth was a Moabite, but now she is the great grandmother of the current king, David, at the time when this story is created. And because he is not a pure Jew, David – the Jewish King through which the eventual bloodline flows through Jesus - would have to be purged. This book of Ruth was created, then, to confront the raging xenophobia that was sweeping the land.

Think we have any xenophobia today? Of course we do! Listen to this explanation of the term:

***Xenophobia is the fear and distrust of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange. Xenophobia can manifest itself in many ways involving the relations and perceptions of an in-group towards an out-group, including a fear of losing identity, suspicion of its activities, aggression, and desire to eliminate its presence to secure a presumed purity.***

We had people murdered twice this past week because two young men believed only the white race is pure. The same thing happens over and over again in history - and even now - when any one group decides they are the 'in group' and anyone who is different is the 'out group.' Yesterday's shooter in El Paso wrote how he wanted to 'kill all Mexicans'. And I woke up this morning to hear another ten lives lost to gunfire in Ohio.

I've talked a lot about immigrants this past year, and there is a lot of fear and wrong perceptions from many, such as when one immigrant has taken the life of 'one of us,' resulting in all immigrants being labeled as murders; or when they work in jobs (like packing plants, the jobs that many of us white folks refuse to do because it's hot, smelly, yucky work) and all immigrants are labeled as job stealers.

What about Leviticus 10: 9 and 10, where Jews were commanded to leave the edges of the fields and the unpicked grapes for the poor and the foreigner? If we take the Bible seriously, we have to respect a law that was created to help those in need at that time. Should we be doing less for our foreign immigrants and the poor today?

**Bishop Spong writes in summary, “The call of God to human beings is always a call to wholeness. No one is whole when acting out of fear. Fear causes people to diminish the worth and the dignity of another when that other is judged to be somehow impure or inferior by reasons of race, ethnicity, gender, left-handedness, or sexual orientation, many of which are regularly reinforced by human religious codes. The book of Ruth...was written to protest all of the limits that human prejudice forever tries to place on the love of God. The book of Ruth provides us with a biblical mirror into which we can stare at our own prejudices and then be led to free ourselves from them.”**

We all have prejudices; so when I look in the mirror at my own what do I see, and what will I do about it?

An immigrant by the name of Karen Gonzalez has written an article about her identification with the story of Ruth and how it is applicable today. I would encourage you read her thoughts:

<https://sojo.net/articles/national-hispanic-heritage-month-lets-celebrate-story-ruth>

The many faces of the Scriptures....when we examine the ideas in new ways, I think we can find many parallels to help us do a better job of “loving our neighbors” today – including the poor and foreigners. Maybe that’s why we call the Bible ‘holy’.