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Whose People Will Be Our People?

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Ruth 1:1-18

Few stories in Hebrew Scripture are as central to our Christian narrative, and are as reflective of what God is up to in Jesus, as the account of Naomi and Ruth.

In many ways it's a thoroughly modern story, a tale of love and survival, of refugees and immigrants, of loyalty and generosity, of family legacy and the quiet strength of women.

Naomi, an Israelite, marries a man from Bethlehem. They flee famine in Israel and travel as refugees to the land of Moab to the east, beyond the river Jordan, where they settle as a family.

But after a time Naomi's husband dies, and with no one to provide for her *and* being a refugee from a foreign land, she faces serious hardship. Fortunately, her sons have grown up. They marry women of Moab, Orpah and Ruth, and can now care for their mother.

We often view the story of Ruth as the tale of individuals and the decisions they make. But their lives, and this story, are lived in a much broader context. Naomi, from Israel, and Ruth, from Moab, represent two nations historically in conflict. Their people are enemies.

To get a feel for the unsettling power of this narrative, imagine it set in the modern Middle East. If we replace Moab with Palestinian Gaza, and Bethlehem with Israeli Tel Aviv, we begin to get a sense of the larger, treacherous, complicated implications of this story.

For a time all is well for Naomi in her new life in Moab, but then tragedy strikes again. Both sons die, leaving her vulnerable once more. The only hope for Naomi is to return to Bethlehem where she has relatives on whom she might be able to depend. She learns the famine that caused them to leave in the first place is over, and she decides to go home.

When Naomi sets off for Bethlehem, her two daughters-in-law decide to go with her, but Naomi stops them. She tells them to go home to their own people, where they have a chance of surviving, of marrying again and starting new families, and being among their own people. Orpah chooses to return home, but Ruth's love and loyalty compel her to go with her mother-in-law, who tries again to dissuade her. I imagine them standing on the banks of the Jordan, the border between Moab and Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, Naomi urging her to return home one last time. But Ruth stands her ground.

“Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!” she says to Naomi.

“Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried.” (Ruth 1:17-18)

It’s a stunning soliloquy, with far-reaching consequences. With her words, Ruth reframes and redefines existing norms and realigns historic assumptions. She chooses to ignore the accepted boundaries between people and nations. She sets *self* aside and declares her intention to use *love* as the measure by which she will live.

The story of Ruth points to the dangers of exaggerated nationalism and the risks of restrictive boundaries within the human family. The story upends old rules about identity, and proposes new ways of thinking about relationships. It shows that grace and generous love can disrupt historic patterns of exclusivity.

After Ruth’s words, Naomi really has no choice, so the two of them set off together for Bethlehem, climbing up into the hills of Judah from the Jordan Valley. Once they get there, they have no means of sustaining themselves. In order to provide food for the two of them, Ruth goes to glean in the fields with other poor, hungry people, picking up leftovers after the harvest. She

happens to do this, to glean, in the field of Boaz, a kinsman of her dead husband's family.

Boaz sees her and is attracted to her, and asks about her and, eventually, with a little encouragement from Ruth, falls in love with her. They have a son named Obed, whose wife has a son named Jesse. Remember the prophetic prediction that "a shoot will come out of the stump of Jesse?" That shoot would be David, son of Jesse, great-grandson of Ruth – David, who would become king of Israel, and from whose line the Messiah would one day come, as the prophets of old had foretold.

In other words, without the courage and strength of Naomi and the perseverance and love of Ruth, the story would end. There would have been no Obed, no Jesse, no David – and, eventually, no Jesus. The entire biblical story for Christians rests on this one foreign enemy woman, a young widow who leaves her own people, with great risk, goes with her mother-in-law, to support her, because it was the right and just thing to do. As the Shaker poem the choir sang earlier says, "Love will do the thing that's right."

Where you go I will go, Ruth says. Where you lodge I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God.

The prophet Micah asks, "What does the Lord require of us?" Ruth, a foreigner not under the law of the Hebrews, instinctively knows the answer: "To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God."

The story of Ruth is a parable for our time. It may not be Moab and Israel, but in America today we live as if we were enemies of one another. There's no longer a common understanding of what unites us as a people. We think the worst of those with whom we disagree. Everything has a zero-sum quality to it. Either you're with me or you're against me.

Your people cannot possibly be my people.

American individualism has always been in creative and generative tension with the call to live as one community. These days, however, that tension has largely been displaced by rampant sectarianism. Very few now try *even to talk* across the divide anymore. Rigid partisanship precludes the possibility of building a shared purpose as a people. We cannot see beyond our own firm boundaries.

Presidential historian Michael Beschloss spoke at the Westminster Town Hall Forum last Tuesday. More than 1700 people were here. The sanctuary and Westminster Hall were filled to overflowing.

We were surprised by the crowd. Why did so many people come? The mid-term elections were over and the relentless campaigning was behind us, and I think people wanted to take a longer view of where things stand in America. We had just marked the 100th anniversary of the Armistice ending the First World War. And our national Day of Thanksgiving is nearly upon us, always a time to pause and reflect on the road we as a people have trod,

and on the journey ahead. People came that day to find hope for the future of our nation.

The questions asked of Beschloss at the Town Hall Forum focused less on any particular president, current or historic, and more on the present contentiousness in our land. People wrote questions expressing serious anxiety about the health of our democracy. They wanted to hear from a professional historian whether things are as bad as they seem. *They are, in his view.*

Beschloss is deeply concerned about the nation and its future. In his study of history, he said, he knew of few times in our country's life as fraught with division and discord, and the potential for worse, as ours. Even as he expressed hope about the enduring strength of American democracy, he warned about the risk of conflict escalating into violence.

This is not only a Republican-Democrat problem, or a conservative-progressive matter. It's not even solely a political problem, nor merely a lack of civility. It's something far more than that.

It's the same question Ruth faced, a question of identity and belonging: *whose people will be my people? Our people?*

It shows up in the rural-urban divide. It can be seen in the widening gulf between those with a high level of economic comfort and those who have been left behind – and in the policies aimed at keeping things like that. We see it in unresolved racial

disparities among us. It's there in the backlash against immigrants. There's a growing education gap and a perception of elitism among us.

We're all caught up in it. We're all caught up in the cultural dividing lines that cut across the nation. And naturally we think the "other side" is at fault; *but none of us is innocent.*

Beschloss said that when American presidents have found themselves leading in a time of war they always become more religious. He described Lincoln coming to Washington as an agnostic, and maybe even an atheist,, but as he sent men off to fight and die on the battlefield he turned to the Bible and to prayer for wisdom and strength and succor. We can hear it in his speeches; he quoted scripture all the time. He needed something beyond his own resources to bear the terrible burden and to help resolve the national crisis.

We need something, as well, beyond our own limited resources. What we're facing, I think, can be described as a *spiritual* problem. We're too mired in mundane, daily outrage to see things from a higher point of view.

In contrast, Ruth refuses to let the prevailing perception of reality – that Moab and Israel are enemies – define her own point of view. She chooses to live according to a different reality. She seeks a deeper, broader, more generous perspective on the human family. She lifts her vision above the discord and looks

beyond it. She wants to see things more as God intends them to be, not as the world sees them.

We're in a moment where our nation lacks that kind of moral vision, a vision that looks beyond the immediacies of our divided house, a vision summoning us to conceive anew the possibilities the American experiment was meant to offer. We cannot keep living like this; there's simply too much at stake *not* to try to reclaim the values at the heart of our democracy – values never perfectly implemented, but that have served as aspirational measures of our life together.

This is a Naomi and Ruth moment, and the question facing us is: *whose people will be our people?*

As Christians, we believe that Jesus embodies God's response to that question.

In the coming season we will we speak of this one who is born in Bethlehem, the descendant of David. We will speak of him as *Emmanuel, God with us.*

Jesus does with all humanity what Ruth does with Naomi. He lives for others and loves them unconditionally, even at the risk of losing his own life.

In Jesus, and in Ruth, we have the blueprint for human community: a generosity of spirit that starts by saying, “*Your* people will be *our* people.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.