

## *The Shape of Belonging: Crossing Borders*

The story of Ruth (from Ruth 1)

On Tuesday evening of this week, the other pastors and I attended an online meeting of the Los Altos City Council. Brian Jones had asked us to be there. Brian is a member of this congregation whose personal commitment to being an ally in the work of racial justice has led him into a focus on how law enforcement works in this community. So Brian was closely connected to—and you may know too if you read the local newspapers--a conflict that erupted in Los Altos last Fall over a piece of local legislation. A young black man and an Asian Council member were on different sides of the issue. Harsh words were said—in person, in text messages, and on social media. And by this last week, it felt like a small war had developed, a local version of the kind of racial tension that we've seen in many other parts of the country.

On Tuesday, the Council was considering a resolution that had been drafted to try to put the conflict to bed—if not to resolve it, then at least to make people on every side feel as if they'd been heard. Seems reasonable, right? Almost a hundred members of the public showed up to comment on one side of the issue or the other. The Council didn't get to a vote until 2 am. The measure passed finally, but it was narrowly divided. There are a lot of bruises left behind.

The people who commented spoke with passion, intensity, anger, even outrage. There were a few who said some version of 'Can't we all just get along?', but most speakers identified with one side of the conflict or the other. There were charges of racism on both sides. You could tell early in most people's statements whether they were there to support the young black activist or the more conservative Asian woman. You could count up how many showed up for each side. People counted.

I too noticed, as I was listening, how quick I was to identify which side each speaker belonged to. Mine. The other. And then, how immediately I dismissed anyone who was too indignantly defending the *other* position. I just stopped listening, taking anything in. No wonder Congress can't get anything done. Democracy is hard.

Actually, *life* is hard among people who are different from you. People who, it seems, stubbornly resist thinking or acting the way you do. We are inclined to divide the world into those who are like us and those who aren't. We find useful shortcuts to help us identify the people with whom we really *belong*, and those who will always be a little like foreigners to us. The color of his skin, who she voted for in the last election, where you went to college, the name of your church. Their connection with that time when you felt hurt, or afraid.

We're going to spend the next few weeks talking about what it means to *belong*. To belong to a group or a community; to belong to one another. I want us to consider the possibility that the communities where we find comfort and belonging don't have to be quite as solid and immovable as we sometimes make them. That if we are seeing with open and compassionate eyes, the shape of our *belonging* will change from time to time. It will have soft, porous skin rather than sharp edges, so that no one is ever confined inside, or locked out.

It think this is a particularly important issue for us right now. As we poke our heads out of the tiny worlds we've been enclosed in for the last fifteen months, we have some choices about who we're going to let into our lives, where we'll choose to stand up straight and let ourselves be seen. We can run straight back to our familiar groups, the people we already know we've missed, our church as we have known it before. But maybe this is a moment for making this congregation, our community, more permeable, enter-able, than it has ever been before.

*Belonging* is what the book of Ruth, from the Hebrew Scriptures, is all about. It's a story about how real people found community, and re-shaped the community they lived in. You may know a little bit about Ruth's story. We've all heard one verse—*Where you go, I will go; your people will be my people, your God will be my God*—at weddings, or as part of beautiful love stories. But the story of Ruth is actually a complex and nuanced drama about political and ethnic boundaries. It's about people who crossed long-standing borders to find and hold onto *their* people. It's about people who became a community of love and forgiveness by learning to talk *to* each other, not just *about* each other

Ruth is a Bible story with no divine interventions at all; only human beings who limp through hard times, who stumble their way toward kindness and generosity, and who are transformed in the process. They change the shape of their community as they unlearn old lessons and open new ways of being together. It's an ancient story, but I think it's meant for this time. For us.

The story begins with people crossing borders. A man named Elimelech and his wife Naomi and their two sons, all Israelites, leave their home in Bethlehem because there's a famine. The word *Bethlehem* literally means, in Hebrew, 'house of bread'; but now even in the House of Bread there is no food. This family is hungry enough to move to Moab, which is a country just across the border, but it's not like immigrating from Washington to Canada. It's like moving from Jerusalem to the West Bank.

For generations, Israelites and Moabites had been enemies. Like most conflicts, hardly anyone alive remembered how it started. Way back in the time of the Exodus, some Moabites had refused hospitality to the Israelites when they were hungry and thirsty. Out there in the desert the Israelites had lots of time to nurse their grievance, their wounded pride. They were so sure the Moabites had personally wished them harm that they put words of resentment in God's mouth too.

*No...Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.*  
(Deuteronomy 23:3)

And in all the years since, no one had forgotten. Kindness is easy to forget. Injury lingers much longer.

So these Israelites--Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons—were risking a lot to immigrate to Moab for food and a new home. They must have been desperate.

Somehow, they make a home there. They stay for ten years. The two sons marry Moabite women, which must have been a hard swallow for their parents. And then Elimelech dies. One son dies, then the other dies too. Naomi is left alone, in Moab. So when she hears that there is bread in Bethlehem again, she decides to return. She longs for her own people, her home.

Her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, offer to go back to Bethlehem with her. Naomi says no. ‘You stay with your own family,’ she tells them both. ‘You’ll be better off here.’ And I wonder if even as Naomi is thinking of these daughters-in-law she loves, she’s also anticipating the shame of going back to Israel carrying the evidence of her sons’ inappropriate marriages. I wonder if Naomi was thinking, ‘I can’t take *Moabites* home with me. What would that say about *me*?’

Orpah decides to stay. Maybe she sees her mother-in-law’s dilemma. Maybe she’s just more obedient than Ruth. Ruth is feisty, just like most of the women in the Bible. ‘No,’ she insists; ‘I’m going with you.’

Ruth is willing to take for herself Naomi’s identity—her land, her people, her God. She too is crossing a border. Think about it: this young woman is giving up her passport, her entire identity, with the hope—and no guarantee—that it will be replaced by another. Trading her security for a life that will be precarious and unpredictable. Exchanging her primary communities of belonging—her family, her nationality, her home—for circles that could be permanently closed to her.

That sounds like the risk immigrants still take today, doesn’t it?

You might think of this story as a sweet fable about the power of love and loyalty to overcome ethnic hostility. But that would be a mistake. Because even after Ruth makes the speech to Naomi about giving up everything to stay with her, Ruth’s difference—her *other-ness*—is not forgotten. There are three more chapters in this short book. In them, Ruth is referred to at least six times as ‘Ruth the Moabite.’ Once, just so there’s no confusion, she’s called ‘the Moabite from Moab’.

Ruth the despised Moabite. Ruth who dared to color right over the solid line that outlined ‘the people of God’. Ruth who became the great-grandmother of King David. Ruth who will someday be named the ancestor of Jesus. Ruth whose story will tell us over the next few weeks how she brought out in the people of Israel the best of themselves.

This is what human beings do sometimes: we think we understand someone by knowing just part of their story, or just one of their many stories. We’ve been taught to make quick assumptions about people by knowing where they come from, or what race or language or political party they are attached to, or how they feel about a single issue that matters to us.

I think it’s time for un-learning that lesson.

I don’t know exactly how to *unlearn* something. But isn’t it so like God to send us a young, undocumented, dark-skinned *Moabite* to teach us?