

The Shape of Belonging: Boaz's Story
From Ruth 3

They say history is written by the winners. And that's often true. Most histories allow us to forget that there's a counter-narrative that could have been told by other people who lived alongside the same events. That from another perspective, the story might have been told very differently. Think about it. American engagement in World War II written by Japanese-Americans. The story of the end of apartheid in South Africa, narrated by the white minority who suddenly found they had no say in their government. The story of the exodus from the perspective of Egyptians. What they saw was their country tormented by plague after plague, invoked by a destructive rebellion of Hebrew secessionists. Every story we regard as history has its own point of view. Every history can be told differently.

The Bible too has a point of view. That's not a criticism or disbelief; it's just the truth. Biblical stories are the stories of a small, not-particularly-victorious tribe of Middle Eastern people who were, again and again, conquered and ruled over by stronger empires: Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Roman. It's important for us to know that our Judeo-Christian history is *their* history. They were underdogs who held onto their identity and values—their *life*—with confidence that no matter what happened to them, they were a people in covenant with the Creator of the universe, a God who had their best interest in mind at all times, and who was powerful enough to make sure that ultimately, someday, things will come out right.

And like every tribe, every group of people that has ever existed, *our* tribe, the people from whom we draw the origins of our story, drew lines that separated *us* from *them*. We talked about this a couple of weeks ago, as we began this series on the Book of Ruth: the bright line between Israelites and Moabites, the tribe Ruth was born into. *We* are the people of God. *They* have demonstrated themselves to be something else. Our identity depends on keeping that distinction between *them* and *us* sharp, clear.

When the Israelites, the Jewish people, got back to their homeland after the Exile, this seemed particularly important. They'd just spent seventy years living in a big soup of people who were not *us*. They'd had to work hard at protecting their traditions, their stories, their identity as the people of the Hebrew God; and they'd done it. Finally, now, they were home. Some members of the tribe didn't come with them. They'd married Babylonians, chosen to stay in the place their grandparents had been deported to. Only the faithful returned, people who still believed that this was the land that God had promised them generations before, the land that God himself had chosen to live in with them.

They began to re-build what they had lost. A wall around their capital city, Jerusalem. The Temple, God's mansion, which had been burned to the ground by the Babylonians. This was the time to give thanks that they'd survived their existential nightmare, and to re-affirm their identity as God's people. Their leaders reminded them of their set-apartness, that they were a holy

people. Prophets arose, to help them give up the bad habits they'd accumulated while they lived in a foreign, unfaithful land. The prophets reminded the people that reclaiming their identity was sacred work, directly connected to the covenant Moses had made with God for them way back in time.

Two of those prophets of that time were Ezra and Nehemiah. They're important figures in Old Testament history, this time of re-building after the Exile. There are whole books of the Bible bearing their names. Both Ezra and Nehemiah spoke what they genuinely heard as the word of God: that marrying foreigners, a practice that the Israelites had strictly avoided before the Exile and then slipped into in those seventy years in Babylon, was forbidden.

Of course the Israelites believed that mixing with Gentiles was dangerous. In any people whose identity comes at birth, rules against inter-marriage are critical. Without them, a tribe, an identity, a whole history, will disappear. You owe it to God, Ezra and Nehemiah said to the Israelite men, to marry only Israelite women. In fact, they said, you must send away your Gentile wives and the children you have had with them. (Ezra 10:3) The book of Ezra ends with a shaming, permanent record of the names of men who had married foreign women.

The prophet Nehemiah carries the same message. He invites the people into a new vow of covenant with God, including, specifically, a promise that they will never again give their daughters in marriage to non-Jewish husbands or take Gentile daughters for their sons. (Nehemiah 10:30) To affirm their faithfulness, the people segregate out of their society everyone who is not of Hebrew descent. They divorce their foreign wives. This book ends with a prayer that God will remember Nehemiah with favor, for the good and faithful reforms he led. (Nehemiah 13:23-30)

This is the time in which most scholars believe the Book of Ruth was written. It shows up earlier in the list of Old Testament books, but its writing seems to place it in this post-Exile context. And here's what I love about the Bible, and why you should love the Bible too. The unknown author of Ruth tells an entirely different story from the one I just told you about Ezra and Nehemiah. The story of Ruth is, as directly as you can possibly imagine it, a counter-narrative to the story that the people and prophets of Israel were telling about themselves. Ruth is a story about a person who defied the advice of the prophets. It's about a faithful Israelite who, in the middle of that Ezra/Nehemiah history, married a foreign wife. It's a story that reminds us that our history is always smaller than God's story.

This is where we pick up the story today.

Ruth the Moabite was residing as a foreigner in Israel. When Ezra and Nehemiah railed against foreign wives, they named Moabites specifically among the foreigners they were talking about. 'Don't have anything to do with Moabites,' they repeated. 'They're terrible people. They'll corrupt everything they touch. God said.'

Ruth the Moabite goes to work for Boaz the Israelite landowner. He is kind to her, treats her as he would someone who was part of his own tribe, his kin. And this gives Naomi an idea. She cooks up a scheme to put her daughter-in-law Ruth even more directly in Boaz's sightline. She

sends Ruth to wait until Boaz is a little bit drunk, and then Naomi instructs her to position herself rather intimately with Boaz as he is sleeping.

This is one more of those times when the Bible refuses to fill in any internal processing, so no one tells us what Ruth is thinking while she does this, but I have to think she was humiliated by this idea. One of the stereotypes about Moabite women was that they had loose morals, slept with all kinds of out-of-bounds people. What Naomi has asked Ruth to do is to act out the stereotype, to press herself on Boaz, solicit his inappropriate attention. I imagine Ruth hated that. But she does it. Why? Because she loves Naomi, and because this mother-in-law who looks to Ruth to provide their financial security has asked her to. So Ruth swallows her pride, and she plants herself at Boaz's feet.

In the cultural idiom of that time, this is a proposal to Boaz to marry her. Think about that in the Ezra/Nehemiah context I just told you about. For Boaz to marry Ruth would mean defying the leaders, the prophets, the traditions of his tribe. The wisest counsel of the Israelites has said, quite clearly, that marriage outside their community is a threat to their existence, their covenant with God. Boaz knew that.

So what does Boaz do? He marries her. He refuses, at his peril, to let the conventions of his time and place, even the ones that use God-language, constrain him. He sees Ruth's willingness to risk her dignity for the sake of her wholehearted devotion to Naomi, and he loves her for it.

This is a story about kindness. An extraordinary kindness compels both Boaz and Ruth. Their actions are not just the niceness of polite company, or even social obligation. They put something at risk as they look out for the welfare of someone else. They cross bounds of propriety, tradition, even self-respect.

Boaz does this in three specific, concrete ways that I think might be instructive for us.

- He listens to Ruth's story. He understands her well enough to look past her (frankly kind of cheeky) behavior. He sees the good inside of her.
- He resists stereotyping. Even before he knows her well, Boaz addresses Ruth as 'my daughter'. He assumes a bond of kinship strong enough to eclipse the innuendos about her ethnicity.
- He challenges the rules that cement prejudice into place all around him. This is truth-telling, the willingness to cross over even when there's a law or tradition that could allow you to back up comfortably.

We talk a lot around here about connection, compassion, courage. I usually think of those three values as a contemporary version of an ancient, Jesus-inspired faith. But here they are, in a story that was written five hundred years before Jesus lived. Connection—the willingness of these two people, Boaz and Ruth, to make and sustain a boundary-crossing commitment to one another. Compassion—the openness to hear another story and let it change your view of the world. Courage—to walk right past the risk of ignoring convention, even history, for the sake of putting love into action.

This story, the marriage of Boaz and Ruth, is a total surprise in its historical context. But it's not a surprise to us. This unlikely marriage is part of our tradition too. It occupies our Bibles right alongside the words of Ezra and Nehemiah. The children of this marriage that defied 'the law of God' are part of our ancestry. Boaz and Ruth have a son who is named Obed, whose son is Jesse, whose son David will become king. King David will establish the line out of which Jesus will be born, the story says, hundreds of years later.

And maybe that is the way it will always be: that the connection and compassion and courage of real, everyday, ordinary people create the soil out of which the Messiah will come. Again and again and again.