Rev. Kathleen McShane June 20, 2021

The Shape of Belonging: A Community of Risk-Taking Kindness
From Ruth 4

Last October, there was an essay in the *Atlantic* called *America's Plastic Hour Is Upon Us.* The historian George Packer talked in that piece about a theory that says that in history you can see occasional, crucial moments when real change happens. When systems and institutions that have been frozen in place for a long time are suddenly able to bend. *'Plastic hours'* he calls them. They're rare, but when they happen, it's often because some sort of crisis has blown up our assumptions about people and institutions and how things always work 'always' work.

Packer was saying that our country might be in one of those plastic hours now; and if it is, real change for good might be possible. We've been fully discombobulated over the past two years. Not only by a pandemic that disrupted our work, our relationships, our activities; but by political turmoil, and a series of events that has woken many of us up to the ways racial inequality is bone-deep in our American-ness.

Plastic moments are great opportunities, he said; but they can go unnoticed, wasted. Nothing changes unless we make a move, unless we're willing to push past what we've done before, to test the pliability of the structures that hold us.

I feel like the same thing might be true of the Church right now. Here we are beginning again, not knowing exactly what church will look like in the future. We're a little raw, less confident about who we are, less fortified by the structures we used to think of as standard. This is a moment for re-thinking things. A moment to write a new story, open new possibilities from the way we thought things had to be.

The book of Ruth was written in a similar time, in a country, a nationality, that had always been defined by its ethnicity. Belonging was established at the moment people were born. Either you're Jewish or you're not. This story comes along and says, 'Not necessarily.' Ruth is really quite a radical story. I imagine it might have first been told sitting around a campfire, when someone asked, 'Do things ever actually change? Was there ever a time when people really changed?'

Just in case you haven't been as totally into the Book of Ruth as I have been over the last three or four weeks, here's the four-sentence summary. Ruth was a Moabite, born into a tribe that had been hated and feared by the Israelites for generations. Ruth becomes the daughter-in-law of the Israelite Naomi. After both their husbands die—Naomi's husband and her son, Ruth's husband—Ruth gives up her citizenship in Moab and follows her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem, a place that is not only strange, but hostile to people like Ruth. Because they have no other financial support, Ruth does something almost unheard of for women. She goes out to work in the fields, for Boaz, an Israelite landowner. Boaz notices Ruth. He notices she's a foreigner, but what he notices even more is the extraordinary kindness and loyalty that Ruth holds toward Naomi. Moved by what he sees, Boaz too goes out on a limb to welcome Ruth, to treat her with the kind of hospitality and generosity usually reserved for family.

Ultimately Boaz marries Ruth, and she becomes a member of the community of Israelites, the people of God. When that happens, when Boaz dares to puncture the wall around his community, something shifts in the people around him. The law of exclusion that has defined this people melts. The mark of belonging, the entry point, is suddenly not just ethnicity; it's kindness. The Israelites' community and their power are enlarged, not the usual way--by plundering an enemy--but by creating space for someone else, someone they had thought, until just a little while ago, was *so wrong*. They *let in* something that will change them.

The current in this story begins with acts of kindness. Not the sort of kindness we think of as politeness or niceness. It's radical, risk-taking, no-holding-back kindness. Three times in this story Ruth puts her life at risk: when she leaves her homeland to immigrate with Naomi, when she ventures out to do dangerous work among hostile strangers, when she dares to impose herself on Boaz. Every one of those risks is motivated by her love for her mother-in-law, someone to whom Ruth owes no kinship or legal obligation. Each time Ruth takes that risk, she has no reason to expect a kind or generous response.

But we know. This is what we see in Ruth's story—that a single act of grace and kindness can tip others into similar action, like a domino. That kindness has the power to wake people up, to tap into their well of empathy, call them to more kindness.

The Quaker writer and educator Parker Palmer once wrote: 'Violence is what happens when we don't know what else to do with our suffering.' He was talking about humans in general. He was right; probably every act of violence, conflict, even anger, can be traced back to an unresolved pain, a suffering that has not been met. An injury that needed to be noticed and was not.

The converse of that truth just might be the essence of Christianity. Christianity is about how God in a human body responded to that very human tendency to make others pay for our pain. Ours is a religious tradition that says kindness and grace are powerful enough to overcome every conflict, every hurtful, even unjust act. That love will overwhelm even violence and division, every time. That even when we can't see it happening, seeds of kindness grow into grace, forgiveness, the kind of big love that changes everything.

If that's true, then Christianity's big idea is prefaced, telegraphed, in this ancient story about Ruth and Boaz. In this story about radical, risk-taking kindness.

What if this became a community characterized by that kind of kindness? What if, in this plastic moment, this became a place where *belonging* isn't about what you believe, or who you know, or how successful you are, but about living on one side or the other of a great, inexhaustible kindness?

The writer George Saunders gave a commencement address at Syracuse University in 2013. He talked in that speech about what he regretted in his life. Not much actually, he said. He told some funny stories about mistakes that might have left him with regret, that he can laugh about now. And then he told a story about a memory that had not left him since middle school.

In seventh grade, this new kid joined our class. [“Ellen,” he called her in his speech.] ELLEN was small, shy. She wore these blue cat’s-eye glasses that, at the time, only old ladies wore. When nervous, which was pretty much always, she had a habit of taking a strand of hair into her mouth and chewing on it.
So she came to our school and our neighborhood, and was mostly ignored, occasionally teased (“Your hair taste good?” — that sort of thing). I could see this hurt her. I still remember the way she’d look after such an insult: eyes cast down, a little gut-kicked, as if, having just been reminded of her place in things, she was trying, as much as possible, to disappear. After awhile she’d drift away, hair-strand still in her mouth. At home, I imagined, after school, her mother would say, you know: “How was your day, sweetie?” and she’d say, “Oh, fine.” And her mother would say, “Making any friends?” and she’d go, “Sure, lots.”
Sometimes I’d see her hanging around alone in her front yard, as if afraid to leave it.
And then — they moved. That was it. No tragedy, no big final hazing.
One day she was there, next day she wasn’t.
End of story.

Now, why do I regret that? Why, forty-two years later, am I still thinking about it? Relative to most of the other kids, I was actually pretty nice to her. I never said an unkind word to her. In fact, I sometimes even (mildly) defended her.
But still. It bothers me.
…
What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness.
Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded . . . sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly.

Real kindness is never mild. It’s never aloof. I wonder if real kindness can even be anonymous. Because real kindness risks making a link, reaching toward someone to whom you owe absolutely nothing.

I want to invite you this morning to think of one person with whom you can make that kind of connection. You don’t have to do it with everyone. We’re not all called to be Mother Teresa. But what might change if each of us extended extraordinary kindness to just one person? One person to whom you owe nothing—someone with whom you have no family connection, no work obligation, no apparent common cause. Someone with whom you will take a risk—of spending your time, or making a financial commitment you’re not sure you’re comfortable with, or exposing yourself to the possibility that they’ll ask you for something you didn’t offer. What might happen? What might change if we could *receive* that kindness?

I don’t want to be naïve about this. Sustained kindness is hard.

It takes stubborn persistence to keep offering kindness when meanness, even hatred, are what come back to you.

It takes courage, one more offering even when you are tired or discouraged.

It doesn't always make you feel happy. Sometimes the demand that kindness places on us is to say to someone what Ruth said to Naomi: 'Your grief will be my grief.'

It will almost certainly require you to step over rules, traditions, good advice about what is prudent and safe.

It means putting aside wanting to look good, and about gathering up points for *our* side, our politics, even our church.

It requires a willingness to *stay*. 'Random acts of kindness' made a cute slogan and a couple of clever ad campaigns by insurance companies, but real kindness is not something you drop on strangers and then walk away. Kindness sees: We are yoked, bound together. If I am to flourish, it will be because you are flourishing too.

That's so different from our live-and-let-live culture, isn't it? But if this *is* one of those plastic, anything-is-possible moments in history, maybe kindness—*our* kindness—is one of those things that could change everything.