

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

Extraordinary Welcome, Everyday Faithfulness

Based on Ruth 1:8; 16-18;
2:1-12

I wish to thank my former professor, Dr. Pat Dutcher-Walls, professor of Old Testament studies at VST, who preached at Synod in Vancouver last weekend, for her inspiration.

Naomi's future looked bleak. Her husband buried, her sons beside him, old age and arthritis settling in, Naomi knew that her options were few. Better to die on familiar ground, if she could get home safely. She might have a chance of convincing a distant cousin or nephew to take her in. But her stubborn daughter-in-law, Ruth, refused to let her go alone.

"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God." (v16)

So, a foreigner living in a foreign land, returned home to her homeland, while another, left her homeland, and became a foreigner in a foreign land. Ruth and Naomi knew that they would need all their wits and their hard work, to hope for any reasonable future. Naomi had left her people many years before, to live in the land of Moab. It is quite possible that

her family shunned her then, and quite possible they would not welcome her return: penniless, widowed, and with another penniless, widowed, and 'good heavens,' Moabite woman by her side.

Naomi set about playing the family politics, using the village gossip to her advantage, and her inherent knowledge of social pressure to at least ensure, she and Ruth might have a safe place to sleep at night and a hot meal at the end of the day. Ruth set about to find work, and found it under the hot sun of the barley fields, working tirelessly to gather enough for her and Naomi. But don't be fooled. The locals were not about to let her forget that she was a foreigner; that she didn't belong. When Boaz asked his foreman who the new woman gleaning in the field was, the servant replied, *"She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi." (2:6).*

Like anyone in this small village didn't already know who she was, but the servant

had to rub it in a little, two times in one sentence, reminding anyone who was listening: Ruth did not belong! It makes one wonder what the men in the field, and the other women gleaning were saying to Ruth out of earshot.

Boaz suspected much the same. But Boaz saw something very different than the villagers. When he gazed over the field, he saw a woman, working tirelessly under the hot sun, never responding to the crude and rude comments directed towards her, a woman who did not appear bitter at the humble circumstances she now found herself in, a woman who left everything that was familiar to her, a woman who was completely dedicated to caring for an elderly woman. Boaz saw a woman of great inner character, and strength; a woman who was faithful in every breath.

Much to everyone's surprise, Boaz scolded the foreman. "Instruct the men to leave her alone. And you *will* let her have a drink from the water pails when she is thirsty. Furthermore, I want you to leave a little extra grain on her rows!" You can imagine the appalled expressions, and open mouths of the workers. You can almost hear it in

their minds, "She's a Moabite!"

But Boaz' actions set the tone. As a wealthy and influential member of the community, his welcome of Ruth into the community, and his praise for her hard work and her dedication and loyalty to Naomi, set the path for her to be later, welcomed herself into the community; despite the fact that she was a Moabite; despite the fact that she was penniless; despite the fact that she was a widow. As the Book of Ruth finishes, a few pages after our lesson today, the writer reminds us, that it was from the lineage of Ruth, that our Saviour was born: from a foreigner, someone different, someone who didn't belong. It should make us stop and think for a moment.

There is great concern about our Presbyterian Church in Canada these days. It was evident at General Assembly this past spring, and again, at Synod last week, that some feel the present conflicts within the church will tear us apart in the end. I do not believe this. Yes, there are some difficult issues that challenge us: refugees, same-sex marriage, and a looming

discussion that hasn't started but should have some time ago, assisted death. Be assured, that once these are debated for a decade or so, there will be new issues, not yet on the horizon, that will be equally as important, potentially divisive, or enriching of what our Presbyterian Church in Canada represents. I would not be standing here today if just such a 'divisive debate' about women in leadership, had not challenged our church half a century ago. There *is* much to debate, and much that *could* divide us. But, personally, I see a church that is richer for our debates, more understanding and compassionate to a complex world, more sure-footed about the foundations of our faith, all because we have had to debate the fact that we are different, and have different opinions.

Boaz recognized a deep faithfulness in Ruth, and welcomed her into the family, despite all the things that made her different. We were reminded at Synod that our Saviour always considered people ahead of issues. He welcomed children to gather around him; he ate with prostitutes, spoke to and

healed men and women who had been shunned by all who claimed to love them. Despite having all sorts of good reasons not to welcome strangers and strange people into his midst, he chose to see the person, to welcome them into His midst. Many of them returned this love with a faithfulness and loyalty that was beyond comprehension for many.

Are we faithful? Do we offer everyday faithfulness to our God?

Are we welcoming? Do we offer extraordinary welcome to those who look different, or think differently than us? Do we look beyond what we see, what we have been told, and what we have heard in the wind, and look into the eyes of a seeker or a sinner, a returning saint or rebellious soul, and with our eyes and our heart, say to them, "Welcome!"

Nervous at what you might find behind those eyes? Cause for debate or a glimpse of just how broad and how deep the love of God truly is? Are you willing to try?