

“The Story of Ruth: A Tale for Our Time”
A Sermon by the Rev. Marek P. Zabriskie
Rector of Christ Church Greenwich
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As Terry noted so well in his sermon last Sunday, there is such a great need for us come together as a nation. Everywhere I go, I hear people talking about the need to overcome our divisions and differences and work toward common goals. We need to reclaim our ability to see each person as a precious child of God.

All of us have all witnessed the growing tendency to focus on what is different among us – seeing ourselves or others as Black, white, Hispanic, Asian, immigrant, foreign, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, atheist, or agnostic, vaccinated, unvaccinated, rich, poor, pro-life, pro-choice, pro-gun, no gun, liberal, conservative, Democrat, Republican, transgendered, gay or straight. The list is endless, but the focus always divides us and fails to bring out the best in us.

In their book, *The Outrage Industry*, authors Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj note that talk-show hosts and online commentators rely on “overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, ad hominem attacks, and belittling ridicule of opponents.” Why? Because it pays off by triggering “emotional responses [like] anger, fear, [and] moral indignation,” which keeps people watching night after night and listening day after day.

Into this national crisis of anger and division, we find the book of Ruth, which is one of the most masterfully crafted short stories in the Bible. Unlike other biblical books where women have supporting roles, the protagonists here, with one exception, are women. The main character is not even a Hebrew, but a Moabite – one of the scorned enemies of Israel. It is a story about love, fidelity and belonging. Some speculate that King Solomon himself wrote this story around the ninth century B.C., but it reads like the solution to the problems that currently plague us.

The story begins in “the days when the judges ruled,” and as the final words of the book of Judges note, “there was no king in Israel; [and] all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” In other words, it was a time of political and social anarchy. To make matters worse, “there was a famine in the land,” which prompted Elimelech and Naomi to leave their hometown of Bethlehem, which means “house of bread,” because ironically no bread could be found. They moved eastwards beyond the Dead Sea to the mountain plateau of Moab.

It was an act of desperation to pack all their possessions and take their young sons to this strange land, because there was a long-standing animosity between the Israelites and the Moabites. There were frequent military skirmishes between the two groups and the Moabites were said to worship an immoral God. But in time, the boys grew up and married Moabite wives. As is often the case, long-standing prejudices are only overcome by personal encounters. Then tragedy struck and claimed the lives of both of Naomi’s sons, just as it had taken her husband a decade earlier.

She decided to return to her native land, having learned that conditions in Israel had greatly improved. Initially, both of her daughters-in-law decided to go with her. This might sound like a miracle for we have all heard stories about meddling mothers-in-law. Some surely fit the bill, but there are many, if not more, who mind their own business and become a very present help in time of trouble. Naomi must surely have been one of the latter.

Despite her affection for her daughters-in-law, Naomi encouraged them to stay behind. Being a widow is never easy, but in that time and place it was especially difficult. Widowhood was viewed as a disgrace. Widows had almost no rights. They were at the mercy of the communities in which they lived. Moreover, as foreigners, there was no guarantee that Orpha and Ruth would be welcomed in Israel. So, Orpha took Naomi's advice, and bid her mother-in-law farewell. But Ruth refused to part ways. Instead, she gave one of the Bible's most beloved speeches, telling her mother-in-law, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! 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 1:16-17)

So, Ruth returned to Bethlehem with Naomi. She left all that was known and familiar to her. The Hebrew word *hesed* is used three times in this story. *Hesed* means "steadfast love," and it's the kind of love needed to keep a promise that we make with God and someone else. Steadfast love is mentioned in every Episcopal wedding, because it's what every marriage requires to get through difficult moments and for us to stay faithful and true.

By good fortune, Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem just as the barley harvest began. Poor people, like these two widows who had no providers to care for them, were allowed to glean the corners of fields and harvest some of the crops. When the owner of the field, a man named "Boaz," who was a kinsman of Naomi, saw Ruth, he instructed his workers to protect her. Upon hearing of his kindness, Naomi told Ruth to bathe, put on a nice dress, sprinkle on perfume, and go down to meet Boaz after he had finished his supper and slip beside him as he lay sleeping. The story reads a bit like a tabloid, and some of you will surely want to race home and read it.

If a married man died childless, Mosaic law obliged his next of kin to ensure that his widow would bear a child. So, after determining that Naomi's next of kin did not want to shoulder this responsibility, Boaz stepped up and took Ruth as his wife. In time, she gave birth to a son, and Boaz allowed the child to be designated as the heir to Ruth's first husband. They named him "Obed," and the story says, "he became the father of Jesse," the father of David, who became the King of Israel. A thousand years later, one of his descendants, named "Jesus," was born in Bethlehem. And so in the first chapter of Matthew's Gospel we find the genealogy of Jesus. It lists only four women – and Ruth is one of them.

Philip Hallie has written that "moral beauty happens when someone carves out a place for compassion in a largely ruthless universe... It happens," he says, "and it fails to happen, in almost every event of people's lives together – in streets, in kitchens, in bedrooms, in workplaces, [even] in wars. But sometimes it happens in a way that engrosses the mind and captivates memory. Sometimes it happens in such a way that the people who make it happen

seem to unify the universe around themselves like powerful magnets. Somehow they seem to redeem all of us from deathlike indifference." We have in the story of Ruth an endearing tale of practical "moral beauty" that can bridge the divides that our nation and world face today.

Eric Larsen's magnificent book *The Splendid and the Vile* chronicles the darkest hours during the London Blitz. Winston Churchill devoted much time to wooing President Roosevelt to support England's perilous cause. He knew that President was an ally in spirit, but that was not enough, if England was to stand a chance of winning its war with Germany.

In a very frank cable to the President during that darkest hour, Churchill wrote, "Remember, Mr. President, we do not know what you have in mind, or exactly what the United States is going to do, and we are fighting for our lives." When the word that Churchill longed to hear was finally spoken, it came not from the President, but from a sickly-looking man in a rumpled suit named Harry Hopkins, who was the President's close friend and adviser.

Roosevelt had dispatched Hopkins to spend the first weeks of 1941 at Churchill's side, touring the devastated parts of London and surrounding towns, listening to the Prime Minister speak of his determination and his desperation. Hopkins could not help but be moved. Finally, at a small dinner in Glasgow on the eve before Hopkins departed for America to speak to the President, speeches and toasts were made, then Hopkins rose to speak. He looked directly at Churchill and said, "I suppose you wish to know what I am going to say to President Roosevelt on my return."

Churchill was desperate to hear his answer. Then Hopkins lowered his voice to almost a whisper and quoted the King James Version of that much beloved speech that the poor, alien widow Ruth uttered so long ago, "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Then, Hopkins added; "Even to the end." A wave of relief and gratitude engulfed the room, and Churchill wept.

The question is: do you and I know the meaning of those words? Are we willing to live that message in our lives? Will we do everything possible to see and treat each person as a precious child of God and lift each other up in Christ? Will we choose the way of Ruth, or risk living in a ruthless world? Well, the choice is ours to make. Amen.