

Nevertheless, She Persisted: Listening to Women of the Bible
Week Three: Naomi and Ruth
by Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander
Countryside Community Church
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I. Erasing Boundaries
Scripture: Ruth 1:1-18

So many of the stories of these women in the bible have additional story lines or holidays attached to them. Last week we had Esther's story and learned how the Holiday of Purim was begun. This week we have Naomi and Ruth's story, which is used in the Jewish tradition to celebrate Shavuot. This holiday commemorates the day that God gifted the Torah to God's people, Israel. On this day God promises devotion to God's people and the people promise loyalty to God. Shavuot also could be translated as "Oaths". It is also during Shavuot that people would begin to bring their first and choicest fruits to the synagogue, to thank God for Israel's abundance and honor. This practice is called *bikkurim*.

Shavuot is celebrated seven weeks after Passover. Does this sound familiar to you? This is the tradition from which we Christians take our celebration of Pentecost seven weeks after Easter. For us, Pentecost is also a continued promise from God to be our God through the giving of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit informs us and fills us as we go out to tell God's story and live into our calling to be authentically who God creates us to be. For the Jews the Torah informs and fills them for the same purpose.

This story of Ruth and Naomi is also used in the Jewish tradition at times when new members are taken into the faith, or converted. Ruth was a Moabite, who married into the family, and was considered a foreigner, who freely chose to take on the God of Naomi as her own. This is a story of conversion and of how she was treated by those who were very different from her, but could see her intense determination and persistence.

As the story goes, Naomi was married to Elimelech and they had two sons. But while the sons were still young, Bethlehem in Judah experienced a famine. The family was forced out of their home country and into the foreign territory of Moab. They were in this land for quite a while and things were going well for them, but then Elimelech died, leaving Naomi to raise her two sons. They stayed in Moab and the boys were eventually married to Moabite women. But within ten years, these sons also died leaving the three women alone to fend for themselves. Naomi decides that she should return to her people and tells her daughters that they too would have a much better chance for sustainability if they returned to their families in Moab.

The daughter Orpha agrees and says goodbye, returning to her family, but Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi, promising to stay beside her so they could help each

other. The most famous scripture in this conversation is verse 16: *But Ruth said, "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. ¹⁷Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"*

Naomi and Ruth return to Naomi's home in Judah looking for a relative she knows named Boaz who has a farm. She is hoping that he will allow them to subsist from the food they can glean from Boaz's fields, after his own gleaners have made their way gathering in the fields. It is a risk for both Naomi and Ruth, just to come alongside a working farm. They have to hope there is enough food left in the fields, and hope that the people there won't be offended by their presence there. Doubling their risk, Ruth is not from their family, but is from a people who have been traditionally an enemy of Israel.

The Moabites and the Ammonites were said to be a nation built out of incest, and were not hospitable toward the Jews, so their law forbids them to come in.

Deuteronomy 23 says:

Those born of an illicit union shall not 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.

No Ammonite or 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, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam son of Beor, from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you. (Yet the Lord your God refused to heed Balaam; the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loved you.) You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live. (Deuteronomy 23:2-3)

By bringing Ruth with her, Naomi increases her risk of being rejected by her family. When they arrive, Naomi instructs Ruth in how to glean in the fields so as not to offend those already there, and Ruth proves to be a tireless worker. These practices not only keep them from being thrown out of the community, they actually become the source of respect between the women and their relatives.

Boaz noticed Ruth's persistence and inquired about her, learning her story. He had the option to reject her as a Moabite, but instead he treated her with kindness and offered her a safe place to gather food for herself and Naomi.

Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a

full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" (Ruth 2:10-12)

Kindness begets kindness. Ruth shows kindness to Naomi, and Boaz is moved to show kindness to Ruth. This story is not about following the laws of the tradition, but rather about showing an example of how we should behave with one another. Beyond the law which excludes Moabites and Ammonites from the community of Israel, there is the tradition of caring for your family – widows and orphans. There is an obligation in the tradition for the closest male relative to marry the widow and have children, in order to care for her and keep the deceased husband's name alive.

Boaz is not the closest male relative, but seeks out the one that is, offering Naomi and Ruth to him. But this man says he cannot take them into his home because it might risk his own inheritance. They agree between them, and in front of witnesses, that Boaz will be the one to marry Ruth, and give Naomi and Elimelech's family children.

When two traditions contradict one another, kindness to one another wins. Boaz sees the kindness in Ruth to care for her mother-in-law even though she is of a different country and from different religious tradition, and he shows them kindness in return, erasing the boundaries that the law created.

Music Meditation:

As we listen to some music, think about a time when kindness was shown to you even when customs or cultures would have otherwise prevented it.

II. Building Bridges

Scripture: Ruth 2:1-17a

Poetry: Kindness

Kindness means that we recognize that others are fragile--that we have the power to hurt or heal them--and we choose to be healers. When we are kind, we don't take advantage of our power or of other people's vulnerabilities. Instead, we seek to comfort, encourage and strengthen those around us.

To be kind requires empathy: we must consciously attune ourselves to the life experience of another being to know what will feel good for them. Kindness builds confidence, because it lets us see others in all of their complicated, needy humanity, rather than putting them on pedestals.

Kindness does not ask whether it will be repaid. Even so, our kindness often ripples through the world around us; it invites others to be kind in turn.

This story of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz shows us that boundaries can be erased in the name of kindness, even when our cultural differences work to prevent it. This is why the Jewish tradition uses this story in their liturgies when they welcome new converts into their community. Because of Ruth's acts of kindness, no longer were

the Moabites or Ammonites excluded from the tradition. In fact the last verses in this story tell us that it is from Ruth and Boaz's children that Jesse is born, the father of King David. The whole family line to the Messiah was created in this act of kindness among refugees!

What might this story tell us about our own behavior to one another? What does it tell us about refugees in our midst seeking safety, shelter and sustainability? Will we let our customs and our laws prevent us from being kind to one another?

Boaz provides a way for Ruth to care for Naomi by letting her glean in his fields and making sure there is some extra food left behind for her to gather. He also provides her water and orders the men to leave her alone as she works, keeping her safe and protected. He offers her dinner within the community, and in the end, marries her and gives she and Naomi children to continue their family name. His kindness is based on her seeking refuge in God's name.

Will we reach out, even against the ban on refugees, to show kindness to those who were forced to leave their home and country in order to seek shelter and safety? Will we provide them with food and shelter as they work to make a place in this new land?

Without this story about acceptance beyond our laws and customs, there would be no interfaith marriage or conversation. There would be no Tri-Faith Initiative. All that we are seeking within our relationships with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters comes from this simple story of kindness. Reaching out beyond ourselves, recognizing the frailty of others, and choosing to be healers instead of hurting one another. Our reading tells us

"When we are kind, we don't take advantage of our power or of other people's vulnerabilities. Instead, we seek to comfort, encourage and strengthen those around us. ... Kindness does not ask whether it will be repaid. Even so, our kindness often ripples through the world around us; it invites others to be kind in turn."

Kindness erases boundaries, and helps us to build bridges of respect and acceptance. All of us are refugees seeking care and comfort from one another. All of us are vulnerable and fragile in our humanity. When we drop our fears and get to know the stories behind the people we meet, we recognize that each of us is God's children. May we continue to listen to these voices of God among us asking us to show kindness to one another. Amen.

Let's listen for a moment to one more of our more current women's voices. Cup of Jane Women's History Video Clip: Dr. Phyllis Wallace
<https://www.facebook.com/pg/DailyCupOfJane/videos/>