

When Love Makes Us a Refugee

Ruth 1.6-18

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First Christian Church

Dr. David B. Hartman, Jr.

Wichita Falls, Texas

Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 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. Where 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!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

After church one Sunday, a little boy approached the minister as he was greeting the congregation and handed him two dimes, a nickel and penny. The boy said, “Here’s 26 cents. It’s all I’ve got right now, but when I get my allowance, I’ll give you a dollar. I’ll give you a dollar every month until I get a real job, and then I’ll give you more.” The preacher was touched by

this, but also flustered, and said, “Son, that’s kind, but I don’t need it. Why did you think you should give me money?” The little boy said, “Jesus said we should help the poor, and my Daddy said you’re the poorest preacher he’s ever known.”

There are different kinds of poverty. Our scripture today is about one older woman, Naomi, who was materially poor—she was quite literally, staring starvation in the face—but she was rich in one great thing: in the love of a daughter-in-law named Ruth, who would not let her go.

The setting of the scripture was in the period of the Judges, which was approximately 250 years between the time the Israelites arrived in the Promised Land and the anointing of Saul as Israel’s first king. During that time, Israel was a loose confederation of tribes whose only governance consisted of the elders of those tribes, who (at least in theory), settled disputes and administered justice in accordance with the laws God gave Moses. But in times of great crisis, God would call forth a prophetic, even heroic leader, called a “Judge,”—Deborah, Gideon and Samson are the most famous examples—who would lead during the crisis and then go back to whatever they had been doing before. While the liberation from central authority, except in national emergency, sounds inviting, it was in many ways a terrible time. Many people in most of the tribes freely worshiped other gods, disobeyed the laws, abused the weak and defenseless, waged vicious feuds, and pretty much did whatever they wanted. Indeed, the Book of Judges concludes with these haunting words: “In those days there was no

king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” That was the world in which Naomi and Ruth lived. That is why the institution of the family was so very important in those days—you relied upon your family, your clan, to take care of you, because there was no one else. Despite Deborah having been a judge over Israel and a great wartime leader, it was a patriarchal society. If a woman’s husband died, her sons were supposed to take care of her. If a woman’s husband died before she had sons, a surviving brother of the husband was supposed to marry her in the name of his late brother, in the hope that she would have a son; that son would be decreed to be the son of the deceased husband and brother. This was known as the Levirate law [Deuteronomy 5.5-10]. So what happens if you are an old woman like Naomi, and your husband dies? You rely upon your sons. But what do you do if your sons die, too, and they have left no issue? Who do you trust then? If the society around you is full of predators, and you are poor and defenseless, on whom could you possibly rely? It was no wonder that Naomi would be led to say, “The hand of the Lord has turned against me.”

Because Naomi, her husband, and her sons had migrated to a foreign country called Moab—where her sons married Moabite women—Naomi was not only bereaved and destitute, she was an alien in a strange land. The only immediate family she had left were her two foreign daughters-in-law, who had no further legal obligation to her. But even though there was no legal obligation, there were still the ties of love. Ruth and Orpah loved

Naomi, and Naomi loved them. In fact, the Book of Ruth is about the power of love transcending national interest and self-interest; and it is through the power of that love that the people involved were saved. Orpah tearfully, regretfully, did what her mother-in-law commanded, and went home to her people. Ruth did not. She told Naomi, “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 I will be buried.” And so Ruth left behind her native land, and her blood family, and went with her grieving mother-in-law back to Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem. Out of love, Ruth became a foreigner, an alien in an alien land. When they arrived, Ruth became a gleaner—she gathered the grain stalks the harvesters had left on the ground. The owner of the field was a man named Boaz, a relative of Naomi’s late husband. He was impressed with how hard Ruth worked. Naomi contrived that they meet in another setting. They did; eventually, Ruth and Boaz wed. In time, they would have a child, who was celebrated as “a son born to Naomi,” to affirm that her lineage would not perish. That child was named Obed, and Obed would have a son named Jesse, and Jesse would have a son named David, who would become King of Israel. All of which means that, according to the Gospels [Matthew 1.5 and Luke 3.32], Ruth and Boaz would be, many generations hence, the ancestors of Jesus Christ.

When grief-stricken Ruth and Naomi stood on a hill and planned to walk to a place Ruth had never lived, in the hope that she could find a job as a migrant worker, the prospects could not have been more grim. They were

not cogs in a wheel. They were real people who made real choices, and all of their future was based on Ruth's decision to choose love and loyalty over self-interest. God blessed that choice, and that choice blesses us.

Ruth and Naomi were refugees. There are many refugees in the world today, more than at any time since World War II. Of course, not all migrants are refugees. Some people migrate not because their lives are in imminent danger, but because they're looking for more opportunity. Most of us here today are descended from migrants who came to the United States because our country afforded more opportunity than where they were. Knowing our own lineage, and the choices our forebears made—the way *we* got here—ought to cause us to at least talk respectfully about migrants who try to come to our country today for the same reason. But the true refugees are those who flee because to stay where they are is to put themselves or their children at grave risk of death by persecution, terror, war, famine or plague. A significant number of today's refugees are our brothers and sisters in Christ, who are being persecuted, dispossessed, or slaughtered in places like Iraq, Syria, northern Nigeria and North Korea for no other reason than that their Lord and Savior is our Lord and Savior. But even if a refugee is not a fellow Christian—a brother or sister in Christ—they are, nonetheless, our neighbors, and Jesus taught to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Jesus Christ has done so much for us. He taught us how to live, he died for our sakes, he defeated death and opened the gates of heaven so that we might dwell eternally among the heavenly communion. He also told us what

we could do for him. He told us that we could feed the hungry, and give drink to the thirsty, and clothe the naked, and care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned, and welcome the stranger, because if we did it for the least of his brothers and sisters we would be doing it for him. I think the key here is in the word “welcome:” “I was a stranger, and you *welcomed* me.”

Look, I don't want to talk about the politics of this at all. We're only two months into 2016, and I've already got migraines from politics. I'm mindful that one of the first obligations of any government is to defend the nation's borders, and determine who crosses those borders, and that any government that cannot do that has failed in a basic task of governance. Deuteronomy 27.17 says, “‘Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbor's boundary marker.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’” I don't want uninvited people walking into my home—if they do that, they're intruders, and if they enter my home uninvited with hostile intent, they're invaders. But if I *welcome* them into my home, they are my *guests*. Whether I welcome them or not is my choice. It is a matter of inner disposition, of trying to determine what would our Lord and Savior have us do.

I will admit to you that I am not neutral on this issue. In my years of ministry, the churches I have been privileged to serve has welcomed refugees from Vietnam, Haiti, Ukraine, Poland and Bosnia. Sometimes it was hard and exasperating. Jerzy, the fellow from Poland, lived in the parsonage with my family and me for over three months, and I sometimes thought he would never leave. Now, he is a thriving entrepreneur, with a

fleet of trucks. The Bosnian family was named Lacevic. They were Muslims from Sarajevo. Under the incitement of war criminals, Bosnian Muslims were being “ethnically cleansed”—which meant they were being slaughtered and dispossessed. The Lacevics’ cosmopolitan city of Sarajevo was under constant artillery assault. The father was wounded, the children were starving, and the family fled in a Red Cross convoy. First, they made it to Germany, and then they made it Harrodsburg, Kentucky, where Harrodsburg Christian Church welcomed them with open arms. Nina, the older daughter, became valedictorian at Harrodsburg High School and won an American Legion Citizenship competition for an essay she wrote. The Lacevics are all in Florida now. The father, Jasmin, is an engineer; the mother, Mensura, who was a physician in Bosnia, is doing pharmaceutical research. The two daughters are both attorneys. They’re all American citizens. A couple of years ago, the younger daughter, Maja, addressed a group of new American citizens who had just taken the oath of allegiance, telling them about her family, and how when her family came to the Christian church in the small town in Kentucky, everyone was smiling. It was so strange to be welcomed, she said—to be greeted with smiles. Our church here sponsored a refugee family some 25 years—the Anastases. They lived with Sandra and Herb Marvel. The wife is a physician here in town; many of our members are her patients. It was a point of pride for the churches I served that if we sponsored a refugee family, they were *our* obligation—if they were hungry, *we* fed them; if they had a need, *we* met it. They were our guests, not the

government's dependents, until they could stand on their own. Now churches like ours cannot sponsor refugees, because the State Department has ruled that sponsors have to live within 50 miles of a refugee resettlement center. The nearest one is in Fort Worth. Our Persecuted Church Ministry Team tried. We even tried to work out a joint relationship with First Christian Church in Fort Worth. The church in Fort Worth was eager to do that. That was disallowed. There are churches all through Texas who would welcome God's children and provide for them until they could stand on their own—because it is what Jesus would have us to do—but they can't, because they're more than 50 miles from Dallas or Fort Worth or Houston or Austin or Amarillo. But we can help refugees today through the Week of Compassion offering.

I want to tell you about another refugee in the Bible. He was a small child. A cruel dictator decided to slaughter all the male children in the town where he was born, and so his mother and stepfather picked him up and fled to another country. Should have they stayed in that town? Should Jesus and Mary and Joseph have remained in Bethlehem when King Herod was slaughtering children? Would we? There is a poem in our bulletin by the child of a Somali refugee family: "You have to understand, that no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land."

"I was a stranger," Jesus said, "and you—*you*—*YOU*— welcomed *me*."
Amen.