

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“God’s Imperfect Family: Ruth and Love of Neighbor”
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Ruth 3:1-18; Matthew 1:1-6

Why is she here? Why is Ruth mentioned as one of only four women in Jesus’ genealogy? This might not be a question many of us have ever asked because Ruth’s story in the Old Testament is such a sweet story and parts of it are often read at weddings. “Entreat me not to leave you, but where you go I will go. Where you stay I will stay. Your family will be my family. And your God my God.” If any woman other than Mary should be in Jesus’ lineage, then perhaps Ruth is it. Yet, there is a problem here, and that problem is that Ruth is not an Israelite. She is a Moabite. She is a foreigner. She is the enemy. And in the time of Jesus, there was a visceral reaction from most Jews toward anyone whose family history was not purely Jewish. This was something that began when the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. The leadership under Ezra wanted to purge their community of all non-Jews so they could maintain a sense of religious and cultural purity. And this desire to have a pure and perfect family was alive and well in Jesus’ time. With that in mind, then why does Matthew include a foreigner into Jesus’ family when Matthew’s audience is Jewish; meaning people for whom a pure lineage would have been important? The answer I would offer is that it is intended to remind people that loving neighbor is not limited to Israelites but includes all people, which is at the heart of Jesus world-encompassing ministry. Let me explain.

In the time of Jesus, there was a great debate among the Jews in Judea about who was neighbor. There were groups like the Essenes, who were the Dead Sea Scroll folks, who believed that neighbor only extended to those in their immediate group, meaning those who lived at Qumran. Everyone else was their enemy and was to be hated. Another segment of society believed that neighbor extended only to other Jews. Gentiles then were enemies and were to be hated. Finally, there were those like Jesus who believed that all human beings were neighbors, because they too were created in the image of God. We see this in the end of Matthew when Jesus tells his disciples to go to all nations and share with them the good news of God’s love. The struggle for Matthew was that since he was writing to a Jewish audience, how could he convince them that the most expansive vision of neighbor was the right one. The answer, as I said, was to remind them of Ruth and her story; because in that story we see the scriptures offering an expansive view of neighbor. So, a quick overview of Ruth.

The book of Ruth deals with the issue of neighbor in two ways. The first is that it reminds us that those who are not part of God’s people, are good people; that God’s people don’t have a monopoly on loving neighbor. A quick overview. Once upon a time, a woman named Naomi, with her husband and two sons, moved to Moab because of a famine in Israel. While they were there the sons married Moabite women, one of whom was Ruth. All the men in the family died, leaving Naomi alone with her two daughters-in-law. Naomi decided to return home and told her daughters-in-law to stay in Moab because she knew they will not be accepted in Israel. Ruth refused to stay and demanded to go because she did not want Naomi to be alone. Once they returned to Israel, Ruth risked both her personal safety to provide for Naomi and her future,

because what Israelite would marry a foreigner? In other words, Ruth had become the poster child for what it means to love neighbor, even though she was not an Israelite.

The second way in which the book of Ruth offers us a glimpse of what it means to love neighbor is in how Naomi and a man named Boaz treat Ruth. Naomi guides Ruth through the adjustments of being a stranger in a strange land. She tells her how to act, where to gather grain and how to be careful. Ultimately, she will also direct her toward finding a husband to protect her. Boaz, is a wealthy man. When he sees Ruth and then discovers who she is, a foreigner who knows what it means to love neighbor, he shows love of neighbor to this Moabite woman in several ways. First, he tells his reapers to leave wheat for Ruth to gather. Second, he tells his reapers not to harass her, which would have been a natural thing for them to do. Third, he invites her to eat with his workers. Fourth, he insures that extra amounts of grain are placed in her sack, so Ruth and Naomi will have enough to eat. Finally, at the climax of the story, he marries her. Yes, an Israelite marries a Moabite...and their great grandson becomes king of Israel. This, the writers of the book of Ruth say, is how we are to understand what it means to love neighbor; to see them as God's good people and to treat them with the love that God offers to us. This is what Ruth is in Jesus' lineage; to show that loving neighbor is expansive and not restrictive.

Human beings have always been suspicious of those who are not like themselves; of those who speak different languages, whose skin color is different, who have different habits and traditions. Our tendency is to exclude them from being neighbors so that we do not have to love them like we love those who are like us. Yet by including Ruth in Jesus's genealogy, Matthew wants to remind his readers, that neighbors are all human beings, near and far. This is how we are called to live as followers of Jesus Christ. We are to live as those with an expansive vision of neighbor. And so that is my challenge to you on this Sunday, to ask yourselves, how am I treating all of those around me as neighbor, understanding there may be among them another "Ruth" in need of our care?

