

Ruth - A Story for Boundary Crossers

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The process of exploring our past is a little like doing research into your family's medical history. In the process of investigating what happened to your ancestors you learn about the struggles they encountered, the issues they faced. As you grow more familiar with your history you begin to see the DNA of your people. You begin to understand what you have inherited. Those rich insights can better prepare you for the things you face. So it is in studying the Bible that we learn about our collective past, our cultural history, and our faith traditions.

All summer long for our sermons we will be telling great Bible stories. Starting with Abraham and Sarah we have explored the stories that tell the history of Israel. In our series we have followed the Hebrew people from the earliest days when God called them to the territory we now know of as Israel. We have talked about how they left their land to go to Egypt during a famine, how Moses took them out and they came back to re-settle in their own territory. After 400 years in Egypt, eventually the Hebrews became slaves that built the pyramids, the Hebrews wandered for 40 years with Moses and then returned to land that had long since become occupied by other tribes, other families, and people of other faiths and nationalities. This was the territory that had always thought of as home. It was the land that they believed God had promised to them. It was the area where Abraham and Jacob had owned and maintained prosperous ranches with large herds of livestock. But that was five centuries before, and generations of strangers had moved in and no one recognized the Hebrews as the rightful heirs. So the Hebrews took the land by force. No one seemed to question that decision. They captured whole cities and took no prisoners, grabbing land, and substituting their own people for the tribes of men, women and children who had dwelled there for generations.

With that kind of an entry into the region you can imagine that the Hebrews did not endear themselves to their neighbors. They may have inspired some respect but they also fostered enormous resentment. They earned a reputation for terror and sowed the seeds of generations of suspicion and rage. In turn the Hebrews distrusted everyone and cultivated a long list of enemies. But if you look at a map, the region we know as Israel is right in the heart of the Middle East. It sits at the center of all the

major trade routes from Europe to Egypt, and starts the land bridge between the Mediterranean Sea and Iraq and Turkey to the East. The Hebrews may have had an isolationist mentality and their faith may have set them apart from others, but their geographic position put them right at the heart of one of the most culturally diverse and ethnically complex places in the known world.

So it makes sense that a great deal of the Old Testament, and some significant portions in the New, deal with the question of who do we trust? How do we secure our borders and prevail against our enemies. What do we need to do to feel safe and secure? Reading through the Old Testament this summer the issues that Israel dealt with historically seem very similar to the ones that she confronts today. But the people in the Bible have never been at peace when they themselves were always on the warpath. Certainly Jesus believed that you treat the neighbor as you would want to be treated. But even in ancient times many people were not isolationists. They were rewarded for their acceptance of strangers. Abraham welcomed three strangers who turned out to be angels sent by God. A Shunnamite woman was kinder to the prophet Elisha than anybody in Israel. Jesus tells us Samaritans can be good. So throughout the Bible there are stories that cause people of faith to question who to trust, who to include, and what borders make sense. Today we talk a lot about border crossing. In a world where so many borders are the sites of fighting, more and more schools have instituted border crossing trips as a way to teach people about other people.

One of the original border crossers was a woman named Ruth. Her story is one of our Bible gems.

We hear stories about the tender relationships between Israel and the West Bank or Gaza. We hear about border strife in Ukraine and in Iraq. But one of the earliest examples of border was the very place where Abraham and Jacob had owned large ranches more than five hundred years prior. The land the people came to was occupied by other families. The Hebrews believed this land was intended for them. They felt sure God had promised it to their people for generations and this was their legacy to reclaim. So they took many of the towns and cities by force and drove the inhabitants out, killing whole populations of men women and children in their way. Last week Heike's poignant story about Samson came from this bloody era.

Once the Israelites had settled in this land, they never felt that their borders were secure. Like many aggressors who have killed to gain territory, they lived by the sword and expected to die that way. They

achieved their military goals but also made many enemies in the process. So their borders were never very secure. The conflict with their neighbors the Philistines is the background for many stories from Samson and Delilah to David and Goliath (which I will talk about next week). Living with their back to the Mediterranean Sea, the Israelites fought ferociously against their enemies the Philistines, the Moabites the Hittites and many others. While their identity was often shaped by war, a healthy conversation emerged in the Jewish culture. Although the official rhetoric in Jerusalem assumed that fighting your enemies was a way of life, failure to prevail would be a form of national suicide. There was also a healthy underground set of voices that recognized that not all foreigners were enemies. In a culture where trade routes traversed the region, traders inter-mingled with ferocious fighters because they felt isolated with the sea.

In last Sunday's *Boston Globe* there was an interview with Barbara Henry. Mrs. Henry is 82 and lives in West Roxbury. In November 1960 Mrs. Henry was a first grade teacher in a school in New Orleans. She had one student in her class, a little girl named Ruby Bridges. You may remember that Ruby became the 6-year old symbol of our nation's struggle to integrate our public schools. Over the furious objections of many whites, this small girl in her party dress, white socks and patent leather shoes carried her book bag as she walked between federal marshals into the Franz Elementary School each day.

Bridges later wrote "Even though this mob of white people was out there every day threatening to kill me, every day there was also a white woman there to greet me. Her name was Barbara Henry. She was my teacher."

As you might imagine a strong bond grew between the young elementary school teacher and the brave little child who became the face of courage in the struggle for school integration. Mrs. Henry writes, "My first moments with Ruby are as clear today as they were then...when kids are shy they raise their heads a little bit." She raised her head "enough for me to see her beautiful brown eyes and magnetic smile. I just fell in love with Ruby. We walked upstairs to begin our long, solitary, and wonderful journey. Our only classmates were the federal marshals at the door. I was the gym teacher and the music teacher. We'd do jumping jacks and sing 'Davy Crocket'. I was just certain I would give Ruby everything I could to become a skilled reader. We created our own oasis of love and learning. We each had hearts free of prejudice. That was the bond that united us and has become indomitable all these many years later."

The two re-connected when Ruby called her teacher decades later. They have since been speakers together at teachers conventions from coast to coast. They joined each other on Oprah to tell their story.

When we pause as a nation to celebrate our nation's birthday this week, there will be fireworks and parades. There will be rhetoric and singing. I hope that we remember that the strength of whatever path to greatness we have paved has been laid with the lives of individuals like Ruby Bridges Hall and Barbara Henry who saw this country as it was and imagined what it might become. Then they bravely forged unlikely friendships. This land is full of thousands and thousands of inconspicuous heroes whose acts of courage demonstrate how much they believe in the principles we cherish as a nation. As you pause to celebrate, thank God for these unheralded men and women who inspire the best in all of us.