

Sinai v. Ruth

Lent 3B: Exodus 20.1-17 (& Ruth...all of it)

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I don't remember many sermons preached in the Virginia Seminary Chapel, but one stands out. The Rev. Dr. Richard Jones was a lanky, bow-tied, affable professorial type, who tucked his poplin suit pants into green Wellington boots for his walk to Morning Prayer when the dew was heavy.

We seminarians were in training to preach, so, even if we'd come to learn that there were hits and misses even among the sermons of our professors, I'd always lean forward a bit when one preached, wondering how he or she might approach the task and the text they'd been assigned. And the text Dr. Jones preached one morning was our reading from Exodus today. The Ten Commandments.

Now, in some traditions and eras, I'm told, a sermon was to be three points and a poem. That was not how we were trained. After one of us preached in homiletics class, Dr. Judith McDaniel would take her chalk to the board and write: "What did you hear?" And what she expected was a single, clear, and coherent point. Which meant that when she asked your classmates to respond, if a great variety of takeaways were offered up, you'd slide a little further down into your seat with each one, as the stern disapproval of Dr. McDaniel, shall we say, ascended.

You need to know this to get a sense of the mix of confusion, righteous indignation, and despair that arose when, ten or twelve minutes into his sermon, after having commented on having no other gods, and not making idols, and not taking the name of the Lord in vain, launching next into his insights on keeping the sabbath day holy, we realized what was happening. Dear God...a pleading with the One who might stop it, not taking the divine name in vain... Dr. Jones was four points into a ten point sermon, at 8 a.m. Morning Prayer. Not only is this homiletical anathema to us, by the time he finishes, we might be late for lunch!

It just goes to show you that, even on a single seminary campus, there will be conflicting voices and mixed messages, even about what a sermon ought to be.

Well, I'm going to do my best not to violate Dr. McDaniel's first rule of preaching. But I am going to violate her rule about not preaching about more than one text at a time. Not only that, I'm going to bring in a story from a book in the Bible we didn't even read from today.

But my point, and go ahead and write this down, so you'll all agree, should Dr. McDaniel show up and quiz you on it. She still kind of terrifies me. My point is that there are also conflicting voices and mixed messages in scripture. But this is the genius of the Bible. Not a flaw of the Bible.

Last week I read a splendid little book called "Borders & Belonging" by two Irishmen named Pádraig Ó Tuama and Glenn Jordan. I don't recall being told advertisements in sermons are forbidden, so I'll let you know that Pádraig is preaching twice at LPS this week, and my interview with him about "Borders & Belonging" will stream at 6:30 Wednesday evening.

The book is a brilliant reading of the book of Ruth, which was used, strange as it sounds, as a framework for hosting difficult conversations around Brexit in Ireland. Join us on Wednesday for more on all that. It's fascinating.

But it was in Glenn Jordan's chapter on the Liturgical Setting of Ruth that I learned something curious about the feast of Shavuot. This is the Jewish feast that occurs seven weeks after Passover. It's the Feast of Pentecost, on which tongues of fire would descend on the apostles centuries later. And central to the Shavuot liturgy are two readings. One is the giving of the Law on Sinai. Moses on the mountain with God amidst the fire and the smoke. Trembling at the divine presence no one could look upon and live. Returning with a glowing face and tablets of stone with the Law etched onto them by the finger of God. The other reading is the book of Ruth, in its entirety.

Now, I don't know if you remember the story of Ruth, but it is the antithesis of the giving of the Law. No pyrotechnics or thunder on a mountain. No obvious divine intervention at all, in fact. A Hebrew couple named Elimelech and Naomi take their sons to the land Moab during a famine. The sons take Moabite wives, but by the fourth verse of the book, all the men have died, and Naomi can't fulfill the family's obligations to the widows of her dead sons, two women named Orpah and Ruth. Naomi decides to return to Judah, and tells her daughters-in-law to go back to their mother's houses. Find good Moabite men and have the life and families they hoped to have with Naomi's sons. She frees them.

Orpah returns, but Ruth's well known response to Naomi was, "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!" Maybe you thought those words were from Ruth's wedding. They were not.

Now the scandal of the whole story's premise...or just a bit of it...is this. The 10 Commandments were essence of the Law, but it's only what Moses got on one of his trips up the mountain. The whole of the Law will fill the rest of Exodus and most of Leviticus and Deuteronomy as well. And in the 23rd chapter of Deuteronomy, we read, "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."

Moabites were hated and excluded in the Law by name from being admitted to Hebrew society, because they did not offer hospitality to the Israelites when they were wandering strangers in the wilderness after being freed from slavery in Egypt.

So, think about it. Elimelech and Naomi, faithful Jews, go to Moab in a famine. Not only that, their sons marry Moabite women! Women who "shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." So when Ruth returns to Judah with Naomi, she is a woman, a widow, a foreigner excluded by divine Law. It's hard to overstate the risk she faced in extending this great kindness to Naomi, her poor, bereft mother-in-law who had lost a husband and two sons in a strange, enemy land during a famine... Naomi who changed her name to "Mara" which means "Bitter." Because that's what her life had become.

The rest of the story is wonderful. Do read it. It's just four chapters long. The Law also requires that landowners not glean the corners of their fields, so that widows and the poor can

gather food. Now, as a Moabite, the validity of Ruth's marriage, and therefore of her widowhood, would have been in question. But it's there that Ruth is seen by the owner of the field, a good man named Boaz, who might qualify as a suitor...but it's complicated. Remarriage regulations in the Law look byzantine to us, even when there's not a Moabite involved. But there's an understated but racy scene one night on the threshing room floor after Boaz has had too much to drink, and, spoiler alert, in spite of it all, he and Ruth do end up together.

And lest we wonder whether this Moabite Ruth were some minor exception to the Law, the book ends with a little genealogy which says Ruth and Boaz were the parents of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, the greatest of all kings. She's in the lineage that will even be necessary to the messianic creds of Jesus of Nazareth generations later. In other words, you can't get further in than Ruth, the Moabite, was in.

In terms of Law, she's an illegal. But her story gets told too. And at Shavuot, her story gets told right up against the giving of the Law that will exclude her.

In case you've lost the thread of this sermon's point as we've jumped around in the Torah and beyond, it is this: There are conflicting voices and mixed messages in scripture. But this is the genius of the Bible. Not a fatal flaw.

Because what telling these stories side by side serves to do at a very basic level is complexify, but also blast open what it means to be a faithful people. The Law provided the corners of Boaz's field where Ruth could glean, but it also said her people were beyond forgiveness. And Holy Scripture does not flinch from telling the story of Ruth walking across the border between enemy countries, through generational hatreds and stereotypes, to the edge of a field set aside for the poor, even across the Law that said she's excluded, and right into the heart of the story of Israel. Her presence reminding Jews year after year that the Law can compel a people to be generous. But it cannot, on its own, plant lovingkindness, *chesed*, in the hearts of God's people. Which is what the difficult goal of it all truly is.

In the end, if there is a clear and unambiguous roadmap for a just and godly life, it is not the scriptures of Christians and Jews. Because our scriptures refuse to let even our scriptures become an idol by modeling a beautiful inconsistency. One that won't even let a Law written by the finger of God have the last word. One that provides space for a single Moabite widow to walk into it and say, "What about me?"

To which scripture responds, not with thunder and stone from on high, but with the dangerous, selfless, lovingkindness Ruth modeled. The brilliant inconsistency of scripture not even allowing itself, even Torah, to get in the way of an unambiguous, "In fact, it is through your impossible presence now in the center of the story, Ruth, that God has changed us and charged us with your costly way of lovingkindness, above absolutely everything else."