

Proper 27B, Ruth 3.1-5

November 10, 2024

The Rev. Scott Walters

Last weekend, Ardelle and I spent a few days in Northwest Arkansas, the part of the country I grew up in and where we were living when we got married almost thirty-one years ago. We hadn't been to Crystal Bridges Museum in quite a while, so we decided to get an Airbnb in Bentonville this time. Bentonville has changed a lot over the past few decades. But I can't say I'm quite at home there. It feels a little like the bedroom of a teenager who just won the lottery. There's a bunch of cool and beautiful stuff there, but, to me, it seems like the fabulous art and hip new coffee shops and amazing mountain bike trails and sleek condos arrived from Wal-Mart the day before yesterday (not from that other online store that shall not be named, of course) and it's all been strewn about the sleepy little Arkansas town of my childhood.

Saturday afternoon, however, we drove down to Fayetteville for dinner at Hugo's, an underground pub near the square where absolutely nothing, from the red cast iron pipes on the ceiling to the Derek's Special sandwich on the menu, seems to have changed since 1986. The same can be said for the perfect musty clutter of the Dickson Street Bookshop just around the corner. One of the books I pulled from its sagging pine shelves that night was *Looking Around*, a collection of essays by an architect named Witold Rybczynski. For obvious reasons, I couldn't pass up a chance to say "Witold Rybczynski" in a sermon. He also happens to be a writer I'd follow just about anywhere to overhear his observations as he looks around.

In one of the essays, he's touring a house renovation in an exclusive part of Montreal. Which inspires several pages of reflection on how and why the opulent Victorian parlor, where guests were received and entertained in the 19th century, morphed into the sparer formal living room of the 20th, which was also going the way of the dodo by 1992 when *Looking Around* was published. He ends the chapter in the luxurious primary suite bathroom of that Montreal house, which Rybczynski says might well be called a "bathing parlor." "It is truly a place for self-presentation—of oneself to oneself," he writes. "A fitting sign of the self-absorbed, individualistic 1980s."

Whether I've been fair to Bentonville or Witold Rybczynski was right about the 80s, we've all been in places that feel alive and places that feel confused. Places that are clearly public ones and others made for privacy. Places that express our true values, and places that express

what we aspire to be. We've also known places that make us feel welcome and wanted and included, and places in which we know that we are not.

I wanted us to think a bit about our various experiences of place today, because place matters to the story of Ruth. Since we celebrated All Saints last Sunday, we didn't read the beginning of the book. The gist of it is this. A famine drove a couple named Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons from Bethlehem in Judah to the country of Moab. The sons took Moabite wives named Orpah and Ruth. But Elimelech and both sons died, leaving the three women widowed. Naomi hears that there is now food back home in Judah, so she decides to return. But she tells her 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."

Orpah returns to her family, but Ruth does not, and speaks the lines that you may have heard read at a wedding or two. "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." This is a love story, in part, as we heard today, but those lines were spoken between a mother and her daughters-in-law, not between lovers.

In today's lesson, Naomi encourages Ruth to make romantic advances toward Boaz, since he seems to have taken a shine to her earlier. What the lectionary skips is the place where Ruth and Boaz first met. They met in the corner of Boaz's field, because Jewish law said that even when you're harvesting the crop you planted yourself in your very own field, you're not allowed to glean all the way to the corners. The Law said you had to leave some of your crop for someone who might need it. Especially for the foreigner who might be depending completely on the generosity of strangers in a strange land. Ruth and Boaz met because the Law commanded Boaz to make a place like that, where someone like Ruth would find welcome.

You've probably heard about that law. But I'm guessing none of you got tripped up by Ruth's ethnicity due to a dustup you had the other day with an obnoxious Moabite. Chances are also pretty good that you haven't done a deep dive into the book of Deuteronomy recently either, so these verses in chapter 23 may not have come immediately to mind: "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." Wait a minute, you're thinking. The Ammonites and Moabites I know are fine, upstanding people. What gives? Why doesn't that famous Hebrew hospitality get extended to them? Well, the verse continues: "Because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt."

Enslavement in Egypt and those forty years wandering without a home in the wilderness, you see, were the lived experiences from which the Jewish Law arose. So much so that whenever the Hebrew people are called back to covenant faithfulness in scripture they are told, over and again, "Remember that you were a slave in Egypt..." Remember that you once depended on the hospitality of strangers. Live like you remember. Build a society like you remember who you are.

We can see how a Law that left food in the corners of fields for aliens and strangers might have arisen from that memory. It's also the graveness of the sin of inhospitality that got the Moabites excluded from the Jewish assembly. What's the definition of the ultimate dangerous enemy? Someone who doesn't help a wandering foreigner in their time of need.

As the story of Ruth and Boaz ends, it takes care to let us know that it was not some heartwarming but insignificant exception in Jewish history. Boaz and Ruth did marry and she gave birth to Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of the great and complicated King David. The hated, excluded Moabite enemy is brought fully not only into the heart of Israel's story, but into its lineage.

Christians will note that a centuries later, a descendent of David will come along named Jesus of Nazareth. And on one of the rare occasions when he sounds a little like a fire and brimstone preacher, it's not about heretical beliefs or sexual sins. Jesus tells a parable of a great judgment in which sheep are separated from goats. And when the condemned ones ask what they've done to bring on this judgment, do you remember what they were told? "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me... Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Jesus says the stranger in need is no less than God's very self.

Let me say clearly that these stories are simply too pervasive and too central to our scriptures for Christians and Jews not to take them into account when we stake out positions on issues like immigration law and border enforcement. But if I think this story comfortably supports everything I believe and only challenges the wrongheaded views of my enemies, well, I don't think I've entered the story of Ruth fully quite yet. To do that, I think I need to ask honestly who the Moabites in my life today really are. The ones whose sins and offenses are simply beyond the pale. The ones about whom I say, "God, I realize

you want us to make a place where all sorts of your children will find hospitality and acceptance and welcome. But surely you don't mean ... them."

Once we've identified our personal Moabites, that doesn't necessarily tell us precisely what's to be done. Remember that you're not offering hospitality to someone who's been abused by making space for their abuser in the room. Boundaries and even forms of exclusion have always played a limited part in creating places of safe welcome, even in scripture. But from the story of Ruth through Jesus's teachings on loving enemies, the arc of the Christian story is always pushing us outward, and asking how a place of hospitality and welcome might be created somehow, somewhere, sometime for even the ones, at least today, we honestly just don't care whether the grace of God ever reaches at all.

There is a spark of the divine image in every life. And if that spark is to burn on and burn a little more brightly tomorrow than it does today, it simply has to find some place of welcome in this world, a place where hospitality has been extended even to it. It's how we were made by the loving source of that spark. All of us.

If you're anything like me you can't just up and make a place for all the Moabites in your life tomorrow. And there is a time for setting boundaries, and a time for pushing through them, even in Holy Scripture. But the story of salvation has been on the move from the beginning toward the ones we can't imagine are still worth reaching for. What we can do is come into places like this one, to bear each other up, to remind each other who we are and where this story is headed. Which is toward a Love that will not rest until hospitality has been extended to every lost and homesick soul that ever was.