

Faith Mennonite Church  
August 11, 2013 - God's Good Creation  
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**Ruth: A story of migration, loss, harvest and community**  
Ruth 2:1-12, 4:11-17

The Old Testament story of Ruth is beloved by many of us. It's one of the great romance stories in the Bible that ends well, and we will return to the romantic aspect of the story in September when we do a series called “Body and Soul,” considering the role of sexuality in our lives, throughout our lives.

The placement of this story in our summer series has more to do with the role of gleaning in the story...of sharing the harvest--sharing the fruit of creation, God's good creation, intended for the benefit of all. But before we get to the gleaning, the generosity which is the heart of this story, there is a prelude. The prelude is scarcity, a famine that sent a family, Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons, into a neighboring country, Moab, in search of food. It's a story of a phenomenon that continues to this day: people leaving their homeland when they are not secure, either for economic or political reasons, and going to a place they hope will offer at least survival, if not an opportunity for a better life. Like many immigrants today, Elimelech and Naomi made a home in that foreign land, and stayed long enough for their sons to marry Moabite women. This family survived, but they didn't entirely thrive. Within ten years Elimelech and both sons died before any grandchildren were born, leaving three women with no future security.

Naomi heard that conditions had improved in Israel. She may have calculated that life as a widow would probably be preferable in her home culture and among extended family, where the practice of gleaning offered something of a safety net. Gleaning was inscribed in the religious laws of Ancient Israel directing land-owners not to harvest to the very edges of their fields.<sup>1</sup> Rather they were to intentionally leave a portion of the harvest behind so that the landless, including foreigners and widows, could come and share in the harvest. As the story proceeds, we learn that the land owned by Naomi's husband's still exists, but without a husband or son, she cannot claim it.

So Naomi returns to Israel in the same way she left—destitute, hoping for survival. Rather than anticipation, which probably fueled her journey to Moab since she was accompanied by a husband and two sons and had a future before her, bitterness is now her companion. Bitterness at all she had lost. Bitterness.... and Ruth, a foreign daughter-in-law so loyal that she was willing to leave her family to accompany a bitter woman into a foreign land.

While Naomi lamented her losses Ruth set out, as immigrants do today, to find a way to bring food into the house. She set off to glean, and ended up in the field owned by a rich relative of her deceased husband and father-in-law. The owner, Boaz, arrived and found out who she was. He offered protection in his field, recognizing that she was doubly vulnerable as an unmarried woman and a foreigner. She continued to glean there during the full harvest season, bringing grain back home to her mother-in-law Naomi.

As I said at the outset, the story turns out well. After a bit of matchmaking devised by Naomi, Boaz “redeemed” the land that belonged to Elimelech. According to inheritance practices, redeeming, or purchasing, the land was tied to the practice of levirate marriage common at the time: Ruth, the widow of the heir to the land, was effectively purchased with the

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 24:19-22; Leviticus 19:9, 23:32

land, and while she would become the wife of Boaz, the land would effectively remain in the family of Elimelech. So widowed Naomi received security through her foreign, immigrant, daughter-in-law. And the first-born child, a son of this immigrant mother, would become the grandfather of the great King David.

The story begins with a destitute, bitter Naomi and a vulnerable daughter-in-law Ruth. It ends with a new family unit, secure on their land, and with a new generation cradled in arms, surrounded by a loving, encouraging community.

While marriage and land ownership practices have changed over the centuries, many of the elements of this story continue to feel fresh: persons and families move within countries and across national borders seeking safety and employment. Families come in various forms and depend on the larger community for support. Healthy communities and societies establish practices and institutions that protect the most vulnerable and open themselves to celebrating and embracing the presence and gifts of the foreigner, the widow, those outside of the norm. And children always bring hope and joy and a future.

Today we remember grandmother Naomi, immigrant Ruth, generous Boaz and baby Obed, as we celebrate with two families who have recently welcomed infants into their lives and homes. They are migrants here—as so many of us are—from Kentucky and South Dakota, Illinois and New York, and additional places along the way. They have known vulnerability and have depended on the care of this community even before their children arrived. We did not send them into our fields to glean, but we made extra soup and bread, and shared some hours on house projects, and began to pass along used baby equipment and clothing. And through our parenting partners we will offer ongoing support and friendship, believing that these children are gifts to all of us and we all share in their care and nurture as long as they are resident here.

At this time, I invite Kristin Bortrager and David Ries and Joel and Katie Cuffey to come forward and share statements of hope for their children and their commitment to parenting before we proceed to the blessing.

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In the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition we do not baptize infants, believing that is a ritual appropriate to an informed choice to follow Jesus on the part of each individual. However, this act of dedication declares that the loving work of God's grace through Christ includes all who are born. When infants and children are presented to God and to the church, they are placed in the care of the church. In the care of loving parents and the church, children can grow up with and into the loving faith of their community.

Prayer:

Gracious God, like a father who nurtures his children you have cared for us; like a mother you have called us by name and claimed us as your own; you have loved us into being, placed us in human families, and bless us on our journey. By the presence of your Spirit consecrate these children and parents for their journey together through life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen