

To whom do we belong?

Ruth 1: 15-17; 2:5-10

Preached by Kathleen Remund for Faith Mennonite Church

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“Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?”

These desperately hopeful words are the first ones that Ruth speaks to Boaz in the book of Ruth—that graceful little Older Testament story about migration, survival, belonging, and faithfulness. “Why have I found favor in your sight...when I am a foreigner?”

This question of Ruth’s cuts to the core. It’s central to Ruth’s story—and to ours, this morning. The book of Ruth begins with Naomi, her husband and their two sons emigrating from Bethlehem to the land of Moab during a time of famine. Moab was a long wilderness journey from Bethlehem, on the far side of the Dead Sea. The ancient Israelites mistrusted the Moabites and most of the Older Testament refers to Moabites as enemies. There’s even a story in Genesis that suggests that the Moabites were the offspring of incest between Lot and his daughters. Moab and its inhabitants were *not* well-regarded.

But *hunger* is a powerful motivator. People will do almost anything they have to do to feed themselves and their children—so Naomi and her family fled to Moab to find food. They were able to make a living for themselves. Naomi and her sons continued to live there after her husband’s death, and the sons eventually married Moabite women. When her sons also died, leaving their Moabite wives widowed and Naomi with no male provider, Naomi decided to return to her home and kin in Bethlehem. It was a dangerous choice. If she stayed in Moab as a vulnerable widow, she would have nothing to live on. But setting out across the wilderness was perilous for a woman alone. *If* she could survive the wilderness journey to Bethlehem, she *might* be able to appeal to extended family members for support. Naomi decided to take the risk, said farewell to her daughters-in-law and prepared to travel to Bethlehem alone.

But Ruth refused to abandon her mother-in-law. We don’t know quite what her reasons were. Maybe she was afraid of her family or alienated from them. Maybe she felt her own chances of making a life for herself would be better in a strange land than they were in her home country. Maybe she couldn’t bear seeing this older woman set off alone into great danger. Or maybe she just loved Naomi and wanted desperately to stay with her. Whatever her mix of motivations, Ruth left her homeland behind and became an immigrant herself, journeying to a strange country in the hope that she could make its land and people her own.

And she committed herself to her own and Naomi’s survival. When they arrived in Bethlehem, Ruth set herself quietly to work gleaning grain in the fields belonging to Naomi’s kinsman, Boaz. It was humble work, reserved for the poorest of the poor. As a Moabite among Israelites, she was seen as an outsider—she was always “the Moabite...from Moab.” So when Boaz spoke kindly to her, calling her “my daughter,” she was stunned. Falling to her knees before him, she asked, “*Why have I found favor in your sight...when I am a foreigner?*”

Yesterday morning I watched a film that Dick Westby has been passing around the congregation. It’s called *Crossing Arizona*. Its focus is on the Arizona border with Mexico, and what has happened along that stretch of desert since the passage of NAFTA and the tightening of border enforcement. Denied legal access into the U.S. and blocked from crossing the border in

adjacent states, hundreds of thousands of hungry Mexican people—“foreigners” made desperately poor by trade policies beyond their control—have risked death, crossing an open stretch of Arizona desert in their search for food and livelihood. Like Naomi and her family, they are willing to make their way through dangerous territory if it means they *might* be able to feed themselves and their children. Hunger *is* a powerful motivator. Like Ruth, they are prepared to risk everything in a wilderness crossing and to work hard when they arrive at their destination. Along the way, they confront hostility—and occasional, startling acts of kindness.

The film introduces us to a recently married young couple who are preparing to cross the border from Mexico to the United States. They share a bit of their story, their hopes and their fears. We worry with them over the dangers ahead. We also meet some of the people—ranchers, tribal members—regular folks who carry jugs and barrels of water to strategic locations throughout that stretch of desert, trying to make sure that people don’t die of thirst on their journey. That long, dry crossing claims as many as 4,000 lives each year.

We meet others who are just as determined to make sure people *don’t* make it across. We hear from members of the Minutemen groups who have armed and staked themselves out along the border to keep “illegal aliens” from entering. The film gives voice to the fears and frustrations of ranchers whose water mains are broken, lands are littered, and cattle are put in jeopardy by people crossing their property on their run from the border. It becomes clear that many people are being harmed by our economic and immigration policies; that everyone is scrambling for a foothold. These are people who, in Martin Luther King Jr.’s words, are “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” But networks of mutuality don’t automatically draw us closer together. When we don’t recognize how much our destinies are connected, we end up blaming the poorest, most desperate and vulnerable among us instead of realizing that we need each other.

We’ve taken this month of January to learn more about the people who are being harmed by our current immigration practices and policies. Last week, members of La Asamblea invited us to remember what led *our* ancestors to migrate to this country. We shared stories of famine, economic hardship, religious persecution. We realized that even in this century, our grandparents and parents and many of us have had to move from place to place in search of better employment or educational opportunities. It’s what people do. And we saw some of the ways we are all interrelated—caught in that “inescapable network of mutuality.”

When Boaz saw Ruth out gleaning in his fields, he asked “To whom does this young woman belong?” He was trying to understand his relationship and his obligations to her. If we ask ourselves “To whom do we belong?” we will find a similar answer in the book of Ruth and in this morning’s words from Martin Luther King Jr. We belong to one another. We belong to the earth. We belong to God. And God’s love (as the banner behind me says) knows no borders. God doesn’t recognize national boundaries or identities. “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.” We are most faithful to God when we keep faith with one another through simple kindness, and when we hold our institutions accountable to the demands of justice and mercy. When we replace our ideas about “foreigners” with the realization that we are all kin.

As we open our ears this morning to hear about the immigrants among us, may we remember Ruth and Naomi and Boaz. May we learn the names and stories of those who have traveled so far and risked so much to live as our neighbors, in our communities. May we find ways to treat each other with justice and kindness, remembering to Whom we all belong.