

Entreat Me Not to Leave You

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, November 11, 2018, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Ruth 1:1-18](#)

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We do the book of Ruth a disservice when we grab only a few verses to read in worship. While I think that the verses we heard today include some of the most beautiful in scripture, the short story is really meant to be read as a whole. If you haven't read the four chapters in one sitting during the past few years, do yourself a favor and read them this week.

And, while I encourage you to read the original with week, everyone needs to be familiar with the basic plot points today for this sermon. So, here is the cliff notes version of the whole story.

An important contextual note: Like all scripture, the story of Ruth is set within a framework of cultural assumptions and norms we need to be aware of. One of them was that "women had no identity or security separate from males – either the ones they married or the ones they gave birth to. Women were defined more often than not by their roles as sexual partners and bearers of heirs."¹

The story begins with a famine in the land of Judah. Because of that famine, Elimelech takes his small family – his wife and his two sons – to Moab. The story doesn't say if they were part of a caravan of hungry refugees or if they made their way to this foreign country on their own. We are simply told that they made their way to Moab to escape the famine.

It appears that Moab was welcoming enough for Elimelech's family to establish themselves. Even after Elimelech died, his sons each married local women.

Then tragedy struck again. Elimelech's sons died. This left a household of three women without a male in their family. Vulnerable in this situation, Naomi (Elimelech's wife) decided to return to Judah. She told her daughters-in-law to return to their birth families in Moab, and Orpah did. But Ruth refuses to go, uttering these beautiful words of love and commitment. "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following after you; for where you go I will go, and where you live I will live; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there I will be buried."

"When Naomi saw that Ruth could not be swayed, the two of them traveled together to Bethlehem. They went to the fields of Boaz, a wealthy kinsman of Naomi. There Ruth gleaned among the ears of grain in order to feed Naomi and herself."²

It is worth noting that Boaz could not order his regular workers to harvest everything. Jewish law required landowners not to harvest what grew in the corners of the

¹ Julie Polter, "Together and Strong," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/together-and-strong> (accessed 6 November 2018).

² Joyce Hollyday, "'You Shall Not Afflict ...'," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/you-shall-not-afflict> (accessed 6 November 2018).

field and not to return to harvest what they missed on the first go-round. That food was left for the poor, for people to come and glean in order to feed themselves. Social compassion was more important than efficiency. Although Boaz was generous-hearted, it was Ruth's right to glean.³

"When Boaz came to the fields and saw Ruth among the stalks of grain, he inquired of his servant in charge of the reapers, 'Whose maiden is this?' When the servant explained that Ruth was the daughter-in-law of Naomi, Boaz said to her, 'Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my maidens.... Have I not charged the young men not to molest you? And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn' (Ruth 2:8-9).

"Ruth was deeply touched by this kindness, and equally so by Boaz' invitation to share a meal with him and the others of his house. For his part, Boaz had been moved by Ruth's care for her aging mother-in-law. Ruth gathered up some extra food after the meal, then gleaned in the fields until evening, and returned to Naomi to share all that she had acquired. Naomi was relieved for the protection that Ruth had been granted by Boaz and encouraged her to stay close to Boaz' maidens, which she did until the end of the barley and wheat harvest.

"Naomi then began to be concerned about Ruth's future, saying to her, 'My daughter, should I not seek a home for you, that it may be well with you? Now is not Boaz our kinsman? See, he is winnowing barley tonight. Wash therefore and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor ...' (Ruth 3:1-3).

"Ruth did as Naomi had counseled her. After Boaz had eaten and drunk and fallen asleep at the end of a heap of grain, Ruth went and lay near him. At midnight Boaz was startled to roll over and find a woman at his feet [if you know what I mean]. When he groggily asked who she was, Ruth explained that she was there to ask him as next of kin to her deceased husband to perform his duty of marriage to her. Boaz explained that there was a nearer relative who should be offered the first opportunity to marry her, but that if he refused, Boaz would be glad to oblige. So the next morning Boaz went to the city gate, where such business was customarily transacted, and talked with the next of kin in the presence of the [community's] elders."⁴ A deal was struck and "Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife." (Ruth 4:13)

The story ends with this little tidbit of information. Boaz and Ruth had a son named Obed, and Obed had a son named Jesse, and Jesse had a son named David. Which makes Ruth, a foreigner, the great-grandmother of the greatest king of Israel.

"Ruth's choice to give up her country and her gods for Naomi is countercultural in more ways than one. The story hinges on Ruth's and Naomi's commitment to each other, the ways they work within a male-dominated system to care for and support each other. "Ironically, Ruth's beautiful, lyrical words, 'where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God' (Ruth 1:16), are often

³ Rabbi Arthur Washow, "What if the Bible's Ruth came to America Today?" *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/what-if-bibles-ruth-came-america-today> (accessed 6 November 2018).

⁴ Hollyday, *op. cit.*

read during weddings. But this is Ruth's cross-generational, cross-tribal, and cross-religion pledge to her mother-in-law, not to a husband.

"The story of Ruth and Naomi is one that is repeated again through history. Ones who are displaced, more often than not women, without home or certain means, find each other and stay with each other. Instead of mutual vulnerability making them weaker, their relationship brings forth grace and strength. God moves in subversion of what culture names as security and power."⁵

I cannot read this story without thinking of the so-called caravan of people from Central America coming north to the USA as they flee violence and hunger in their home countries. Rabbi Arthur Washow raises some chilling questions about this story as he projects it onto contemporary America.

"[I]f Ruth came to America today, what would happen?

"Would she be admitted at the border?

"Or would she be detained for months without a lawyer, ripped from Naomi's arms while Naomi's protest brought her too under suspicion – detained because she was, after all, a Canaanite who spoke some variety of Arabic, possibly a terrorist, for sure an idolater?

"Would she be deported as merely an 'economic refugee,' not a worthy candidate for asylum?

"Would she have to show a 'green card' before she could get a job gleaned at any farm, restaurant, or hospital?

"Would she be sent to 'workfare' with no protections for her dignity, her freedom, or her health?

"Would she face contempt because she and Naomi, traveling without a man, might be a lesbian couple?...

"When she boldly 'uncovers the feet' of Boaz during the night they spend together on the threshing floor, has she violated the 'family values' that some religious folk now proclaim?..."⁶

While President Trump attempts to circumvent current immigration law in his effort to keep the asylum seekers traveling through Mexico from gaining legal access to the United States, the book of Ruth compels us to look not just at U.S. interests, but at the interests, the needs, the plight of these Central American refugees.

Though they have been described regularly as either fleeing gang violence or extreme poverty, there is another crucial driving factor behind the migrant caravan: climate change. "Most members of the migrant caravans come from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador – three countries devastated by violence, organized crime and systemic corruption, the roots of which can be traced back to the region's cold war conflicts [(for which our own CIA bears significant responsibility)].

⁵ Polter, *op. cit.*

⁶ Washow, *op. cit.*

“Experts say that alongside those factors, climate change in the region is exacerbating – and sometimes causing – a miasma of other problems including crop failures and poverty.

“And they warn that in the coming decades, it is likely to push millions more people north towards the US....

“According to Robert Albrow, a researcher at the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies at American University, ‘The main reason people are moving is because they don’t have anything to eat. This has a strong link to climate change – we are seeing tremendous climate instability that is radically changing food security in the region.’”⁷

With a third of all employment in Central America linked to agriculture, any disruption to farming practices, like those caused by climate change, can have devastating economic consequences. Economic disruption can lead to increased violence and other forms of criminality. And the spiral continues.⁸

“A study of Central American migrants by the World Food Program last year found that nearly half described themselves as food insecure. The research found an increasing trend of young people moving as a result of ... poverty and lack of work.”⁹

The book of Ruth is so jam-packed with relevance, it may be one of the most relevant books of the Bible today. This is a story about border crossing and culture mixing. It is a story of the importance of having truly committed friends in the struggle for justice. It is a story agency in the struggle against the patriarchy, of women working together to be the directors of their own lives. It is a story about the importance of creating community.

And here are three other things this story is about. It is a story about confronting racism. “Some scholars believe that Ruth was written to combat the xenophobia and ethnic purity articulated and legalized in Ezra and Nehemiah. In hopes of a new beginning after the Exile, the religious-political leaders ban intermarriage and force Jewish men to divorce their foreign wives. Ezra and Nehemiah believe God’s demands purity and purity begins in the home with the exorcism of otherness. But, Ruth is a foreigner. She marries an upstanding child of Abraham and is a direct ancestor – the great grandmother – of the Great King David. Israel’s greatest king is of mixed-race heritage.”¹⁰

This makes the story one about God’s “gentle, inobtrusive, non-coercive, and persistent”¹¹ radically inclusive love.

And finally, the story is an invitation. It is an invitation for each of us, regardless of our life-situation, “to claim our agency as creators of a new and just world along with God. Our positive use of our freedom gives birth to God’s presence in our world. We are invited

⁷ Oliver Milman, Emily Holden, and David Agren, “The unseen driver behind the migrant caravan: climate change,” *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/30/migrant-caravan-causes-climate-change-central-america> (posted 30 October 2018; accessed 9 November 2018).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Bruce Epperly, “Ruth, Immigration, and the Seven Steps of Creative Transformation,” *Patheos*, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2018/10/ruth-immigration-and-the-seven-steps-of-creative-transformation/> (posted 23 October 2018; accessed 9 November 2018).

¹¹ *Ibid*

to welcome outsiders and foreigners and, if we are outsiders and foreigners, to know that God loves and guides us. We are challenged to become agents and adventures, leaving a legacy of grace and transformation wherever we are.”¹²

Amen.

¹² *Ibid.*