

“Ruth and Naomi and the Way of the Outsider” Ruth 1:1-22; Luke 5:27-31

A sermon Preached by Catherine Foote,
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Seattle, Washington January 24, 2010

“Keeper of our days, we bring our whole selves into your presence.” We have been saying these words together now for a few weeks. As if to remind ourselves how hard it is to actually bring our whole selves anywhere. As if to remind ourselves how easy it is to believe that some part of oneself, or someone in need of community, might be outside of the presence of God. “Keeper of our days, we bring our whole selves into your presence.”

My guess is that everyone here this morning knows something of what it means to feel like an outsider. It might have been the experience of the kindergarten play group that said "no" when you came over, or the agony of middle school cliques, or the deepest sense of being different from everyone around you. It may be when you knock on the doors of power, asking for access, asking for justice, asking for hope. For reasonable affordable medical care for all. For a sense that our government has not suddenly become for sale to the highest corporate bidder. It might have come when loss or grief came your way, and you felt like you were alone, in some kind of glass isolation chamber, able to see and be seen, but unable to connect with anyone around you. It might even be right now, here in this place, when you wonder if anyone else here shares your doubts, your struggles, your shame or your confusion.

My guess is that everyone here this morning knows something of what it means to feel like an outsider.

If you share that feeling, then the Book of Ruth was written for you. The Book of Ruth tells the story of this journey, from insider, to outsider, and back again. It begins with Naomi traveling with her family to Moab because there is a famine in her land. Naomi and her husband are strangers now in this foreign land. She has two sons, and like typical second generation immigrants they both settle in and marry women in this new homeland. And then tragedy strikes. First Naomi’s husband, then her two sons die. And on this orbit from insider to outsider, Naomi reaches the farthest point from the center. Where she is now she is not only a stranger in this strange land, but she is utterly alone. In this story that reads almost like a woman's version of the Book of Job, Naomi comes to suspect that even God has abandoned her. In a place of despair, Naomi decides to go home.

And isn't home what we all hope for when we find ourselves in those times of despair?

So Naomi releases her daughter-in-laws from any obligations, sends them back to their own homes, and sets out. But something in her character, or in their relationship, or perhaps even in the way she is at her point of deepest grief, causes her one daughter-in-law Ruth to insist on going with her, to join her on her journey home.

Not only, “Your people will be my people,” says Ruth, but “Your God will be my God.” Now most

people who talk about evangelism will tell you that conversion comes from seeing the deep happiness others experience in their faith. But Ruth sees something beyond that. When Ruth looks at Naomi, even in the moment when Naomi might look most like an outsider, Ruth still says, “Your God will be my God.” Even when Naomi returns home and says to the people who gather to meet her, “I have changed my name to ‘bitter,’ because God has dealt bitterly with me;” even then, Ruth sees something deeper than despair in her mother-in-laws relationship with God, and says, “Your God will be my God.”

Any of you who have been to the movie theater in Langley called The Clyde know that it is an old fashioned theater. They play one movie, once a day, for a few days, and then the movie changes. We do get the current films, but we usually have to wait until they have been in other theaters for awhile. I’ve been waiting to see the movie “Precious,” and it was scheduled to be there a few weeks ago,. That was the movie I intended to see, as a way of understanding more deeply the story of someone on the outside looking in. And those of you who have seen that movie can no doubt make those connections.

But it turned out that there wasn't a print available to fit the schedule (a typical problem for a small, independent theater like The Clyde), so at the last minute they switched to a movie called *Skin*. This new movie was the true story of Sandra Laing, a black child born in the 1950s to white Afrikaners unaware of their black ancestry. Sandra looked like she did not belong in the restricted, white communities where her family lived. And the uproar she caused when her parents enrolled her in a boarding school led to a change in the apartheid law that assigned her racial classification not based on her parents' race, but on her appearance. And since her appearance was not "white" enough, she was kicked out of school and banned from all-white areas and activities.

It was painful to watch this child change from an open, happy girl to a lonely, confused outsider, In one particularly excruciating scene Sandra locked herself in the bathroom and scrubbed her face and arms with bleach, then ran from the room crying in pain as the chemicals began burning through her skin.

The story of Sandra Laing is the story of a child trying to find home. And it is also the story of a nation, wrestling with ways it has made the finding of home impossible. At such times, the place of the outsider can be just too painful, and the search for home can feel like it will cost one’s very self.

And when we speak of what it means to be an outsider, we also must acknowledge that religion has had a habit of naming insiders and outsiders too. Too much of the history of religion includes the stories of those circles, drawn to exclude. Even this last week we heard the words of Pat Robertson drawing circles of insiders and outsiders related to the devastation in Haiti.

And standing over and against those stories is the story of Ruth and Naomi, a story that not only looks back to the story of Job, but also forward to the story of the Good Samaritan. Ruth and Naomi’s story tells us that pain and loss and grief do not separate you from God and God’s community. Ruth and Naomi’s story reminds us that differences do not separate you from God’s story. Ruth and Naomi’s story reminds us that lack of power in any particular culture do not cut you out of God’s future. At a time when the people of Israel had returned from exile, and were drawing circles of exclusion that said, “Samaritans can’t help build the Temple,” and “Religious men don’t marry ‘foreign’ wives,” another

possibility, a deeper imagination, emerges.

In this story of Ruth the Jewish community weaves into the fabric of its self-understanding the tale of outsiders, of a woman in despair and a loyal foreigner, of a foreign wife who moves from the outside to the center of the whole community's Story: as Ruth becomes the mother of Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David. And ultimately the writers of Jesus' story put Ruth in his lineage as well.

When Jesus eats with the outsiders, he is reminding the community of its very own story, and then inviting them to break open in new ways.

And we are invited there too.

Our community finds its renewal when it finds its open heart.

Our community finds its center when it welcomes those on the very edge, and brings them in, and hears their stories, and then makes those stories a part of their own.

Our community finds its full life when it stands in the path of Jesus, which is a path that stretches back in time and in faithfulness, and forward too.

“Keeper of our days, we bring our whole selves into your presence.” And then we remind ourselves of the truth: “God's steadfast love is with us now.” Amen.