

## **I've Been Meaning to Ask...Where Do We Go From Here?**

### **Ruth 1:6-18; Acts 10:34-48**

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Today is the last sermon in our series I've Been Meaning to Ask...and today's question is Where do we go from here?\_I have to admit I was puzzled when looking at the materials. What does this mean for FUMC Ann Arbor? How do Ruth's and Peter's story relate? How did these passages answer the question – where do we go from here? As always, re-reading the Bible is a very good thing. New words make themselves known. Themes you had not considered before suddenly appear. And a little conversation with God brings to light connections where none had been seen before.

Ruth's story seems a little more obvious. Her words have long been used in wedding ceremonies. But this was a younger woman speaking to her mother-in-law. "Your people will be my people, your God my God." It's a wonderful declaration, however I always found it odd as a child how this story had anything to do with a wedding. Because this is more than a story about love, I personally didn't appreciate all the implications until immersing in the story of Ruth as part of Disciple Bible study.

So let's look at the back story. Elimelech and Naomi of the tribe of Judah left Bethlehem (a familiar name to us) to seek relief from the famine in Judah. Surprisingly they headed for Moab a country that did not play nicely with the Israelites. But Judah was experiencing a famine. And like many before them (remember Joseph's brothers and Jacob relocating to Egypt because of a famine), they sought to take care of their family. They had two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Although the Israelites were to keep themselves set apart, the sons eventually marry Moabite women.. Enter Ruth and Orpah. Sadly Elimelech dies and then both Elimelech's and Naomi's sons. This leaves Naomi, Ruth and Orpah alone. Can you imagine their laments? Women in this period were without property and totally reliant on family. They were the marginalized community that God had continually instructed his people to care for.

Now the famine has lifted during the time, Naomi was away. She encourages both of her daughters-in-law to return to their families in Moab which are **their** biological families. Orpah leaves them and returns home but Ruth chooses another road and declares her loyalty to Naomi and her God.

*Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God. (Ruth 1:16)*

It is a covenant and parallels one that we know so well. ***I will take you as my people, and I will be your God*** (Exodus 6:7).

It is first heard in Exodus 6:7 and again in Leviticus, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel. And now Ruth joins the people of God. A remarkably courageous move for a woman of her time. They are not aware yet that they will find shelter and support from Boaz, a distant kinsman of Naomi's. But again I can see the hand of God working in the background. God embraces a "stranger" - someone outside the circle. Or outside as we perceive it.

We've heard the story of Boaz taking note of the young woman gleaning on the edges of his fields - the leftovers. In time, Ruth and Boaz marry. A Moabite woman marrying the kinsman of Elimelech secures the lineage that includes Obed, Jesse and King David, ultimately culminating in the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem of Judea. God has always used circumstances to further the kingdom. What if there hadn't been a famine? What if the family had not gone to Moab? What if Chilion had not married Ruth? The list of questions goes on. Can you hear God calling or working in the background? And Ruth answering, "*Your people shall be my people; your God shall be my God.*"

So I've been meaning to ask.....where do we go from here?

In Acts 10, we encounter Peter. He is summoned by God utilizing the assistance of Cornelius, a Roman centurion with citizenship but of Italian ancestry and a Gentile. A believer but a Gentile. In the verses preceding our reading today, Peter has a vision that prepares him for this encounter.

It was lunch time.

He was hungry.

He fell into a trance.

He saw the heavens open

A large sheet descending with reptiles, birds, and four- footed creatures

Food for nourishment

To Peter - food not to be eaten.

But he heard the words of the Spirit saying: *“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”* (Acts 10:15).

When Cornelius’s men arrive to summon Peter, he goes with them. To be sure the others don’t forget the Judaic laws he follows (and himself I imagine), Peter explains when he meets Cornelius. *“You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.”* (Acts 10:28) No one is profane or unclean. Remember it was Peter and Paul who met in a Jerusalem conference to discuss the Gentile converts and agree upon which Jewish laws the Gentiles must be in compliance with. Once again Peter’s heart opens to new words from God, new places to go and new people to be in ministry with.

*“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”* (Acts 10:34-35)

During Peter’s speech about Jesus, the ministry, Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection with those gathered, the Holy Spirit descends on **all** present including the Gentiles. Might it have looked and sounded like Pentecost, the wind roaring through the space and flames dancing on their heads? I like to think the Spirit was not being shy. Indeed it was apparent that God was pleased and was present in the space. Peter opened the circle a little further and offered baptism to all the Gentiles present.

So I've been meaning to ask.....where do we go from here?

It's not clear to me that we know the destination or that we need to know. Only that we go where God calls and his kingdom includes all that he created. Peter who held close to the Mosaic rules regarding food, circumcision and keeping company with Gentiles, received enlightenment that everything God creates is good including people, the Gentiles.

Ruth, a widowed Moabite woman, chose to follow her widowed mother-in-law to Naomi's homeland. A land where she would likely not be welcome but for them to be her people, their God her God. Instead Ruth and Naomi found a home in the land that belonged to Boaz, a marriage and family that many generations later resulted in the birth of Jesus to Joseph and Mary. The lineage of Jesus ancestry included a Moabite woman. God's invitation is more expansive than we can imagine.

So I've been meaning to ask.....where do we go from here?

Can you hear God calling?

Come. Take my message to all people.

Come. Care for all my people who are suffering from injustice.

Come. Spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

Listen for that still small voice of God. It often gets lost in the daily routines and chaos of life. And it is often not what we expect. God challenges our assumptions of what is right and wrong. God does not vote people off the island.

Open your ears. Listen for God's call. Then let us go where God calls. Where there is a need and offering the kingdom of God to all. Even when it is hard and we are taken out of our comfort zone. Caring for all our neighbors and choosing how to live in a pandemic world that respects all

individuals. Navigating the waters of denominational changes and creating a vision for FUMC Ann Arbor ministering in this community long after we are gone.

Listen for God's call and let our answer be like Ruth's; *All your people are our people, and you are our God. We will go where you send us.*

Oh let it be so. Amen.