

“The Samaritan Woman”

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Ruth 1:1-9, 15-18

John 4:5-42

[Ruth said,]

*“... I will go where you go, I will live where you live;
your people will be my people, your God will be my God.”* Ruth 1:16^b

Let us pray... O God,

As we seek to worship you in spirit and in truth,

may we be led to go where you go and live where you live

and that your people – who are among the least of these,
the minority in our midst, will be our people, too.

Amen

These words between two women – a mother and a daughter-in-law,
are a timeless testament of human love and loyalty.

The period *about which* the Book of Ruth was written was around 1100 BCE,
portraying as a relatively peaceful time in the midst of a violent era
of ancient Israel’s history.

The book itself was written sometime around the reign of King David –
or afterwards, and perhaps as late as 500 BCE – after the Babylonian Exile,
when Jewish people returned to rebuild their nation.

It is possible that the Book of Ruth was written as a protest to the harsh policies
of reclaiming a religious national identity, which are described in Ezra 10:10-11

¹⁰ *And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them,*

*“You have trespassed and married foreign women,
and so increased the guilt of Israel.*

¹¹ *Now then make confession to the LORD the God of your fathers,
and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land
and from the foreign wives.”*

Sadly, the people comply – though the scripture does say that the people
sought a delay...

¹² *Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice,*

“It is so; we must do as you have said.

¹³ *But the people are many, and it is a time of heavy rain;
we cannot stand in the open.*

Nor is this a work for one day or for two;

for we have greatly transgressed in this matter.”

[Ezra 10:12-13]

Willard, p.2

The people also seem to call their leaders into account and to physically be present to observe the process – of breaking up families...

*14 “Let our officials stand for the whole assembly;
let all in our cities who have taken foreign wives
come at appointed times,
and with them the elders and judges of every city,
till the fierce wrath of our God over this matter
be averted from us.”*

[Ezra 10:14]

Yet there were some who took a stand and objected to this policy, though it is not clear if they were officials or not...

*15 Only Jonathan the son of As’ahel [Ahs’ sahel] and
Jahzei’ah [Jazay’ rah] the son of Tikvah opposed this,
and Meshul’lam and Shab’bethai the Levite supported them.*

[Ezra 10:15]

Again, this was about 500 BCE when the exiled Judean people had returned as religious Jews to rebuild the nation of Israel and the reason why Ezra instituted divorce from foreign wives.

The Book of Ruth – if it was written at this time, directly challenges this initiative of ethnic purification.

Ruth was a Moabite – a person from a nation that had been an enemy of Israel, and by her declaration of loyalty and love for Naomi, her mother-in-law and by her desire to profess the God of the Israelites, she was choosing to *be* an Israelite.

While working in the fields of Boaz – a rich landowner and Naomi’s kin, this same Boaz falls in love with Ruth and marries her.

There apparently was no concern at the time about her Moabite heritage and at the end of the Book of Ruth, we learn that she was the great, great grandmother of Israel’s greatest king – King David.

500 years passed after the rebuilding of the Temple and repopulation of Jerusalem, when, on the outskirts of a Samaritan town,

Jesus was resting from the noon-time sun,
sitting by a well that was believed to have belonged to Jacob –
the ancient patriarch for both Jews and Samaritans,

Now, Samaritans were the remnant population of the Northern Kingdom of Israel who intermarried with other conquered peoples that were forcibly displaced by the Assyrians in 722 BCE.

Willard, p.3

The Samaritans claimed their heritage through Joseph one of the 12 sons of Jacob and adopted Israelite beliefs as their own.

But the Jews of Jesus' day despised the Samaritans as heretics and shunned any contact with them.

So it was a bit shocking when a Samaritan woman comes to this well to draw water – and Jesus asks her for a drink.

For what happens next, I love this story for its playfulness *and* spiritual depth...

It might be a 21st Century American cultural assumption to think that this woman takes Jesus' talk about 'living water' as an invitation for flirtation and so she flirts back.

No scandal materializes, though, as Jesus immediately resets the emotional boundaries by asking her to go and bring her husband.

She abruptly responds that she has no husband, and Jesus agrees with her – while noting that she has had just a few less husbands than Zsa Zsa Gabor and the man she is now with is not her husband!

It is at this point she declares,

“Sir, I perceive-that you-are a prophet.”

[John 4:19]

There is no condemnation by Jesus in the conversation that follows – all pretenses are gone, and this woman is allowed to be who she is, in his presence.

Then they engage in a spirited though friendly debate about the merits of Jewish and Samaritan beliefs respectively.

She demonstrates that she is competent in the knowledge of Samaritan tradition and their common hope with the Jews for the coming of the Messiah.

It is at this point that Jesus reveals his identity – as the Messiah, the Christ!

How often are we disappointed in life or shocked by some new low in human behavior or overwhelmed by natural catastrophe?

Yet are there not times when we can still be taken by surprise at something so wonderful and unexpected that we can't even put words to it?

Such a moment occurs for this woman of Samaria who departs without one word more – to tell everyone she knows that God has finally shown up!

This woman had been an outcast from her own people, because of all her failed marriages.

She had avoided going to that well in early mornings;

She had avoided going there to draw water with other Samaritan women because she was tired of having to endure their contempt,

but now she found her voice again!

Willard, p.4

The secret weapon of Western civilization – and specifically Christian community,
is the advocacy of women's rights.

Along with democracy, the quest for justice on behalf of women's rights
will transform human society, undermine all systems of oppression,
and set free all people in the process.

Helping people to live up to their potential to be all that they can be
though not just to do whatever they want to do,
but to act in concert with one another
leads to individual self-actualization and social transformation as well.

That is what women seek for themselves – and to achieve that,
they will bring everyone else along with them.

I believe that is a specific gift that we have from Jesus Christ
the One who came from God, the True Heir of Humanity...

The Gospel lesson concludes with the Samaritan people of that village
responding to this unnamed woman's report...

*39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in [Jesus]
because of the woman's testimony,
"He told me all that I ever did."*

*40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them;
and he stayed there two days.*

41 And many more believed because of his word.

John 4:39-41

What follows, then, seems to be step backwards, though,
as if to discount this woman once again...

*42 They said to the woman,
"It is no longer because of your words that we believe,
for we have heard for ourselves, and we know
that this is indeed the Savior of the world."*

John 4:42

Time will tell – not if, but when, this unnamed woman and others like her
will get their due recognition as messengers of that Good News
that will continue its liberating work
to save individuals and transform the world...

Willard, p.5

I will close with the Magnificat of Mary the mother of Jesus,
celebrating the Good News of Christ's advent with her aunt Elizabeth...

*46^b "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for [God] has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.*

*For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
49 for [the One] who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is [God's] name.*

50 And [God's] mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation.

*51 [God] has shown strength with his arm,
[God] has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts,*

*52 [God] has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;*

*53 [God] has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich [God] has sent empty away.*

*54 [God] has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
55 as [God] spoke to our fathers,*

to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."

[Luke 1:46-55]

That promise continues to unfold...

Amen

*Our lesson today from Ruth 1:1-9, 15-18 is a powerful declaration
of loyalty and commitment between two people –
one that is often used as a scripture reading for weddings...*

^{1,2} Before Israel was ruled by kings,
Elimelech from the tribe of Ephrath lived in the town of Bethlehem.
His wife was named Naomi, and their two sons were Mahlon and Chilion.
But when their crops failed, they moved to the country of Moab.^(a)
And while they were there, ³ Elimelech died,
leaving Naomi with only her two sons.

⁴ Later, Naomi's sons married Moabite women.
One was named Orpah and the other Ruth.
About ten years later, ⁵ Mahlon and Chilion also died.
Now Naomi had no husband or sons.

^{6,7} When Naomi heard that the LORD had given his people a good harvest,
she and her two daughters-in-law got ready to leave Moab and go to Judah.
As they were on their way there, ⁸ Naomi said to them,
“Don't you want to go back home to your own mothers?
You were kind to my husband and sons,
and you have always been kind to me.
I pray that the LORD will be just as kind to you.
⁹ May he give each of you another husband and a home of your own.”
Naomi kissed them. They cried.

¹⁵ Naomi then said to Ruth,
“Look, your sister-in-law is going back to her people and to her gods!
Why don't you go with her?”

¹⁶ Ruth answered,
“Please don't tell me to leave you
and return home!
I will go where you go, I will live where you live;
your people will be my people, your God will be my God.

¹⁷ I will die where you die and be buried beside you.
May the LORD punish me if we are ever separated, even by death!”

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that Ruth had made up her mind to go with her,
she stopped urging her to go back.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

John 4:5-42

5 So [Jesus] came to a city of Samar'ia, called Sy'char,
near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.

6 Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey,
sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour.

7 There came a woman of Samar'ia to draw water. Jesus said to her,
"Give me a drink."

8 For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

9 The Samaritan woman said to him,

"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samar'ia?"
For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

10 Jesus answered her,

"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you,
'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him,
and he would have given you living water."

11 The woman said to him,

"Sir, you have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep;
where do you get that living water?"

12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well,
and drank from it himself, and his sons, and his cattle?"

13 Jesus said to her,

"Every one who drinks of this water
will thirst again,

14 but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give [them] will never thirst;
the water that I shall give [them] will become in [them]
a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

15 The woman said to him,

"Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

16 Jesus said to her,

"Go, call your husband, and come here."

17 The woman answered him,

"I have no husband."

Jesus said to her,

"You are right in saying,
'I have no husband';

18 for you have had five husbands, and
he whom you now have is not your husband; this you said truly."

19 The woman said to him,

"Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet.

20 Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem
is the place where [people] ought to worship."

- 21 Jesus said to her,
 “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when
 neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem
 will you worship the [Abba/]Father.
- 22 You worship what you do not know;
 we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.
- 23 But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers
 will worship the Father in spirit and truth,
 for such the [Abba/] Father seeks to worship him.
- 24 God is spirit, and those who worship [God]
 must worship in spirit and truth.”
- 25 The woman said to him,
 “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ);
 when he comes, he will show us all things.”
- 26 Jesus said to her,
 “I who speak to you am he.”
- 27 Just then his disciples came.
 They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but none said,
 “‘What do you wish?’ or, ‘Why are you talking with her?’”
- 28 So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city,
 and said to the people,
 29 “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did.
 Can this be the Christ?”
- 30 They went out of the city and were coming to him.
- 31 Meanwhile the disciples besought him, saying,
 “Rabbi, eat.”
- 32 But [Jesus] said to them,
 “I have food to eat of which you do not know.”
- 33 So the disciples said to one another,
 “Has any one brought him food?”
- 34 Jesus said to them,
 “My food is to do the will of [the One] who sent me,
 and to accomplish his work.
- 35 Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’?
 I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see
 how the fields are already white for harvest.
- 36 He who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life,
 so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.
- 37 For here the saying holds true,
 ‘One sows and another reaps.’
- 38 I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor;
 others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

- 39 Many Samaritans from that city believed in him
because of the woman's testimony, "He told me all that I ever did."
- 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them;
and he stayed there two days.
- 41 And many more believed because of his word.
- 42 They said to the woman,
"It is no longer because of your words that we believe,
for we have heard for ourselves,
and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world."