

Reading Ruth
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Reading Ruth
Ruth 1-4

Once upon a time there was a couple who was compelled to leave their lands and move elsewhere. They picked up all their stuff and started walking. A caravan.
No, not Mexicans...Their names were Abram and Sarah

Once upon a time there was a family threatened by a natural disaster. Their lands flooded; they barely escaped on a boat. They moved to find shelter elsewhere.
No, not those from Hurricane Maria, or Florence....This the family of Noah.

Once upon a time there was a famine and no food to be had. A poor, starving family crossed a border illegally to find food.
They were the sons of Isaac, Joseph's family traveling to Egypt.

Once upon a time an ethnic minority was persecuted and oppressed by the majority. There was violence. Babies were killed.
No, not the Uigers in China...This was the Israelites under Pharaoh.

Once upon a time a family fled certain violence from a gang in power. They left to protect their child and went across the border to find asylum.
No, not Hondurans...This was Mary and Joseph and Jesus.

You see our faith life is the story of migration, of people moving from place to place, of people living as aliens in the land, and making a new life somewhere else.

Our ancestors in the faith were illegal aliens, undocumented, refugees, strangers in a strange land. So many...

Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Lot, Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Noah, Joseph, Israelites, Moses, Miriam, Rahab...
And yes, Jesus

We are the people who make a pilgrimage toward God. Since our first parents left paradise, humanity has been made up of migrants.

We could say that the Gospel of John could say, "The Word was made migrant and lived among us"

So as we watch a caravan of Central American migrants walk to our border, how do we respond? What does our faith tell us? How shall we greet them?

Daniel Groody, Roman Catholic priest, writes:

"As people of faith, we are caught and confused, too, says We are caught weighing the relative values of national security with those around human insecurity. We are confused about national sovereign rights and human rights. We are conflicted about citizenship and discipleship.

This debate, these fears around immigrants and migrants, this discussion we have in our country is a debate that plays out in our Bible as well. Amidst all the stories of migrants, and

Levitical law that tells us to welcome the stranger as you were once strangers. And to pay the alien the same as the citizen, etc.”

To hear our own UCC Statement: ” No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” Does that include undocumented folks?

There is a period of time in our biblical history where this holy welcome of God for the alien, stranger, and sojourner was in conflict.

To read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, two of our prophets whose words are captured in the books of the prophets, they said clearly that we must get rid of the alien, get rid of those foreigners who are changing and damaging our identity as Israelites.

You must go back to a pure life, a pure race, and divorce your foreign wives, cast our your foreign children, and make Israelites pure again.

And in response to their prophetic texts comes the book of Ruth. Which has a very different message. Ruth is a very small book, which could so easily have been left out of the canon, left out of the Bible. And it speaks so loudly.

Here is the condensed version of the story of Ruth.

It begins...In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land of Bethlehem, and a man named Elimelech picks up his family: his wife and their two sons and they walk to Moab. They are economic/natural disaster refugees.

The man dies. The two sons marry Moabite wives. (Moabites were considered enemies of the Israelites). Then the two sons die. The three remaining women: Naomi the wife, and the daughters in law, are left with few choices. Begging, prostitution, or Naomi goes back home in shame.

They depart for Bethlehem. One daughter stays in Moab, the other refuses to leave her mother in law. That woman is Ruth.

They arrive in Bethlehem. Ruth goes out into the fields to glean, a practice of letting the poor have the food that falls to the ground. She catches the eye of a man named Boaz who wants to marry her. To do that he has to redeem the family, claim their land, claim these two widows, Naomi and Ruth. Naomi is no problem. She is family, an Israelite. But Ruth is a dirty, sinful, pagan Moabite, an illegal, a woman of no status, a drain on the social services program (gleaning).

But--she is welcomed. And she and Boaz marry. And they have a child named Obed. And Obed is the father of Jesse, who is the father of David. And an ancestor of David. An ancestor of Jesus. Our greatest leaders have a heritage that includes illegal aliens.

Of course our own probably does too. My great-great-whatevers who settled in Vermont did not legally take the land from Native Americans. African American ancestors who arrived as slaves did not have a choice in their arrival here and were only protected when the birthright citizenship amendment passed. Chinese immigrants brought for labor were not allowed to be citizens. Indentured workers... the list goes on.

But Ruth’s story is about welcoming the stranger, caring for the refugee. Giving shelter and compassion to those among us who are fleeing danger, destruction, destitution.

“Care for the alien in your midst for you were once aliens in the land,” says the Levitical law over and over again.

Our faith tradition tells us to welcome the refugee, the stranger, the asylum seeker. To welcome them as our own. The tired, poor, and huddled masses, the poem inscribed on the Statue of Liberty. What does that mean for us as a faith community?

It can mean many things:

Pilgrim might decide that caring for the refugee and the alien in our midst is a pressing issue that we want to rally around, put our mission energies toward. So it could be a much stronger relationship with Lex RAP caring for refugees right here in Lexington. Giving time and energy to helping that organization.

Pilgrim could decide to be a sanctuary church. First Congregational Church UCC in Amherst is providing sanctuary for a single father and his children in their building. They are accompanying him and keep him safe so he gets due process. There is now a sanctuary fund for churches embarking on this ministry.

There are collections that can be taken of supplies that particularly help in border ministry.

LGBT Asylum Task Force of Hadwen Park Congregational Church (UCC) in Worcester offers refuge and help to LGBTQ asylum seekers from countries where their lives have been threatened, they've been imprisoned, or been victims of violence. And they purchased a house this year in partnership with the Mass UCC to serve as a home for these folks while their process goes ahead.

This summer at General Synod there will be a resolution in front of the whole church to vote on becoming an immigrant welcoming church.

More than anything, we need to keep an open heart. No person is illegal. We are a church of love and redemption and hope. We are a church of second and third chances. We are a church of welcome.

Daniel Groody concludes his article by saying, “From a Christian perspective, the true aliens are not those who lack political documentation but those who have so disconnected themselves from their neighbor in need that they fail to see in the eyes of the stranger a mirror of themselves, the image of Christ, and the call to human solidarity.”

We are all strangers in a strange land.

Amen.