

Sermon on Ruth 3:1-5, 13-17

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

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You know, they just did things differently in the Old Testament.

This story from the book of Ruth is one of the classics. Naomi and Ruth, mother and daughter, are living as strangers in a strange land. They are Moabites, a despised tribe from the wrong bank of the Jordan River. Naomi has an Israelite husband who is not Ruth's father. The only way Ruth can hope to survive after her mother dies is to get an Israelite husband of her own. Single women, without protection of the household they were born into or married into, were fair game for financial and physical abuse, rape, and even unprosecuted murder. All the railing by prophets against abuse of widows and orphans wasn't aimed at imaginary issues.

So, Naomi instructs Ruth in the fine art of seduction. She wants her daughter pregnant by an Israelite because only then will Ruth have the leverage she needs to land that Israelite husband, and maybe survive.

I have to tell you, I haven't had anybody come to me asking to be married, telling a story quite like that one.

But there's more. It turns out that the child born out of this odd union is the grandfather of David, the greatest king of Israel. Recall that Israelites hated Moabites with a rare passion. This would be like Hitler having a Jewish grandmother. Even stranger is that the Moabites traced their lineage back to Lot, Abraham's nephew. *So, they're all related!* That's like saying Nazis and Jews were originally the same. And of course, as we know, that's true, if you trace them far enough back into the past.

It's a really messy state of affairs. Everybody's related, but they hate each other. Ruth builds a bridge between them by seducing a guy and conceiving a future king of Israel. All of the clear lines we like to draw between good guys and bad guys, between our people and "them," even between moral acts and pretty immoral acts, seemed to blur and dissolve. It's hard to get a handle on right and wrong in this story.

It brings to mind Jim Casy, an ex-firebrand Baptist preacher in Steinbeck's Depression-era, Dust Bowl novel of the 1930's, *Grapes of Wrath*. Casy will tell you that earlier in his life he could stir up an irrigation ditch full of freshly baptized sinner so much that half of them like to drowned. He dealt in the world of good guys and bad guys, in those days. Saints and sinners. Clear lines. But then, after years of whipping and punishing other people and himself for sins that didn't always seem like sins in the end, he reached a different conclusion.

"There ain't no sin and there ain't no virtue," he declares. "There's just stuff people do...and some of the things folks do is nice, and some ain't nice, and that's about as far as any man got a right to say." Now there's a view of human good and evil that's likely to make us squirm.

So, Jim Casy really does have a different perspective on Naomi schooling her daughter in ways to seduce her way into a marriage. He might not feel so clear cut

about the difference between Israelites and Moabites, either. Or Germans and Jews. Just look at how people treat each other, he seems to say, and think twice before you take it further than that.

This sort of thinking takes us into squirmy territory. We're on the slippery slope headed down into what gets called "moral relativism" these days. Isn't it a whole lot better, we're told, to have moral absolutes that always tell us exactly what God wants us to do in any and all circumstances? Isn't it better to know what's good and what's bad, who's with us and who's against us? Why should we be taking the word of Steinbeck's fictional failed preacher for anything?

I would respond to that by pointing out the way the church's unbending moral rules can at times sound like government regulation, where we're also in the world of absolute rules. Government regulation is meant to apply across the board, always and everywhere, one size fits all. We all know how crazy that gets. Ask anybody who's tried to get a building permit or worked the welfare bureaucracy. Absolute rules have to apply to every situation and protect against every possible abuse, and that makes them overbearing, rigid and often inappropriate.

Yet there are a lot of people who want to believe that God does what the government can't. They hate one size fits all regulation from the government, but they want to believe that God can provide it. So, I ask you in all seriousness, is God a bureaucrat? Should Naomi have applied for a waiver before instructing her daughter? Is there an exemption form Ruth should have filled out?

No. Like it or not, we do live in that squirmy world of slippery slopes and moral relativism. How do we deal with that? Not by relying on a rulebook, but on our own conscience, our integrity, our commitment to the two great commandments. Here's the point: *the measure of what God wants and needs from us is actually much higher than mere rule-keeping and obedience.* Obedience is only about gritting our teeth, but conscience means we must look deeply and honestly within ourselves. That's hard.

Jim Casy has something to say about that. He defines the territory we move into when we let go of being judgmental and ask what's really in our heart. Casy believes it's the Holy Spirit you find in there. "And what's...this sperit?" he says. "I say it's love. I love people so much I'm fit to bust some times."

It's love for Ruth that motivated Naomi. It's love for God and for Israel that motivated the prophets to say horribly unpopular things in defense of widows and orphans and calling for fair treatment for Moabites. It is love for all of us that motivated Jesus to embrace the cross where government bureaucrats nailed him.

Love sets the bar much higher than absolute rules of obedience and judgment. The difference between love and law is the difference between government regulation and building our nation. Regulation seeks only to control and manage, and though it's necessary for governments to try, it's hard for them to succeed at regulation. The analogy of building the nation, however, takes us into the world of vast generosity and investment. Investment of money and resources. Investment of people and all the expertise, commitment and energy that they bring. The willingness to offer our lives in military service. The investment of imagination and faith, and in the end, yes,

investment even of love. People who would build nations have to love and care and give as primary virtues.

God is not even about nation building. God is about world-building. It's difficult for me to imagine that, in the end, God is going to be worried about adjudicating every little screw up that went on in your life. God's a lot bigger than that. God will ask, "Did you love and did you pour yourself into building the world that I saw when I created that world and saw that it was good?"

Well, did you? Are you? Will you?

Jim Casy's simple observation about love reverberates throughout the rest of *Grapes of Wrath* and should reverberate for us. Casy, it turns out, has been talking to a man named Tom Joad this whole time. Joad has just gotten out of prison in Oklahoma for killing a man. He was on the long, hot, dusty walk back to his family when he met Jim Casy by the side of the road, where they started talking.

After all his theologizing, Casy asks Joad if it made a difference back when he baptized him in that irrigation ditch all those years earlier. Joad tells him that, for a long time, he couldn't really say that it did. Then he pauses, and in the unspoken, incompleteness of life that hangs over these few simple sentences, Steinbeck has set up the rest of the story, and what a story it is.

Will Tom Joad become the man Jim Casy baptized him to be? Will he find the Holy Spirit and love that took him into the baptismal waters? Will he be the man God needs him to be? Will Joad love his family enough to see the Dust Bowl through with them? The flight to California? The Great Depression? Death, loss, grief, destitution? Will he family-build? Will he nation-build along with the other desperate Americans in those days? Will he, blind to it though he may be, build the Kingdom of God? Is he that faithful? Is he that good a man? That's what God cares about.

Tom Joad can't conceivable see that. Not in the moment of his baptism. Not even later on his walk home from the penitentiary. Maybe he will see it at the end of his life. Yet God can see it in every minute of his life. We can too, when we read his story.

What does God see in you that you haven't seen yet? What will others read in your story? What do you hope to see in the end that you will have built with the power and in the name of love?

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