

Sermon preached on November 5, 2006

Scripture passage: Ruth 1:1-8

This week I have been thinking about chestnuts. I know that American chestnuts are hard to come by, now—because of a blight that has pretty much wiped out the chestnut tree population in this country. But my grandfather had a chestnut tree on his farm and so when I was growing up, I learned a thing or two about chestnuts. For one thing, I learned that chestnuts have a prickly outer covering—a burr. If you’ve ever had the experience of collecting chestnuts, then you know that you have to wear gloves, so that you avoid getting pricked. It takes a strong man with calloused hands to pull off those prickly casings. On my grandfather’s farm, after my brother and I had collected the chestnuts, we passed them on to my grandfather so that he could remove the burrs. Once the burr was off the nut, the work still was not done. Underneath that, there was yet another covering, or a shell. That, too, took some doing to crack open. Once the shell was off, you’ve got it. The work STILL was not done. That is because the chestnut was protected by a thin bitter skin. Peel that off and finally, finally we got to the meat. Now by this time you are probably thinking to yourself, “Gee, why bother?” Indeed! When I was a child, I quickly lost interest in harvesting and shelling chestnuts—too much work! Chestnuts, I think, fall into the same category as artichokes or pomegranates. The amount of energy expended TO eat them probably exceeds the amount of energy gained FROM eating them!

I’ve been thinking about chestnuts because as it is with them so it is with the story of Ruth. Ruth is really a story inside a story inside a story. On a quick read you might think that this is a story about two women who leave one region of the Middle East for another in order to survive, but it is way more than that. So, today I hope that you will work with me as we crack open that first story, find the story underneath, then crack through that story, too, and finally peel off the skin to get at the meat. You’ll have to decide for yourself whether the meat inside is worth all the work.

So, let us put on our gloves and begin! Before we can truly understand this first, outer story, we need to know more about the time period and the region in which our story takes place. That is easy enough. The story tells us that Naomi and her family lived during the time that Judges ruled Israel. If we were to consult our Bible Dictionaries, we would find that the Judges ruled several generations before David became King of Israel, sometime around 1200 and 1000 BC. We read in the book of Ruth that Naomi and her husband and their two sons traveled from Bethlehem to Moab. They traveled to Moab because Bethlehem, a small town in Judah, was experiencing a drought. If we were to

turn once more to our Bible Dictionaries we would find that Moab was not part of Judah—it was a separate country altogether and it was not on friendly terms with Judah. The Moabites worshiped a different god than the god of Israel. The god they worshiped was called Chemosh. The Moabites spoke a different language, too—it was similar to Hebrew but different enough so that communication between a Moabite and a Jew would have been difficult.

We can surmise from our story, then, that Naomi and her family, when they first arrived in Moab, were very different from the Moabites among whom they settled. Despite religious and language differences, though, Naomi's family managed to put down roots. They assimilated well. When it came time for her two boys to marry they took Moabite wives.

But, we read that hard times continued to follow this family. First Naomi's husband dies, then her two sons. With no financial means to survive, she determines to leave Moab and return to her home country to live with her blood kin. This is where, as they say, the plot thickens. According to custom, Naomi's daughter-in-laws-were now part of Naomi's nuclear family. What was to happen to them? Naomi is right in suggesting that their best hope for a future is if the daughters-in-law return to the home of their blood relatives. In somewhat melodramatic fashion, Naomi says, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me?" Yet, Ruth determines to stay with Naomi and travel with her to what is for her, a foreign land: Judah. She does this because she loves Naomi. In a short and moving soliloquy, which is considered one of the most moving passages in the Old Testament but which also has just a touch of melodrama, Ruth declares, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried."

Ok. We've explored just about all there is explore in the part of our story which is our scripture reading for today.. You might say, we've broken through its shell, to return to our chestnut analogy. Now, let us consider shell, or story, number two. I told you earlier that the story of Ruth took place in the time of the Judges. That is true, but it is not necessarily when the story was conceived. There is some evidence in the story itself that the story of Ruth was conceived and written after the Jews returned from exile. That evidence has been discovered by Hebrew scholars who know a lot about word derivations. Here, we'll just have to trust the commentators I consulted this week. Remember, the Jews were living in exile in Babylon from 587 BC to around 538 BC. In 538 BC King Cyrus of Persia, defeated the Babylonians and gave the Jews permission to return to their homeland. That means that Ruth was written after 538 BC—that is, after exile.

Ok, so in story number one you've got Ruth and Naomi traveling from Moab to Bethlehem. In story number two, which, again, is the historical story of the Jews after exile, you've got the Jews traveling from Babylonia back to Judah. Moab to Judah, Babylonia to Judah. Gee, seems to be a parallel here, don't you think? There is another parallel. Just like Naomi traveled back to Judah with the Moabite Ruth at her side; most of the Jews, who were returning to Judah from Babylonia, were accompanied by their Babylonian relations.

Now here we should pause and consider what that must have been like. Imagine: Babylonian Mom and Jewish Dad load up the family camel, have a tearful parting with friends and family, tell the children no potty breaks till lunch time, and then with nervous excitement, hit the road with a song on their lips—"A hundred jugs of wine on the wall, a hundred jugs of wine," sung in both Hebrew and Babylonian.

So far we have two parallels. In both stories you've got Jews traveling from a distant land back to Judah. In both stories, these Jews are accompanied by family members who are not Jewish. There is still one more parallel. Just as Ruth accompanied Naomi to a strange land out of love for her mother in law, the Babylonians accompanied their Jewish family members presumably out of love for those Jewish family members.

Now, rather unhappily, I think, this is where the parallels end. If we were to keep reading in Ruth we would learn that she survived and supported herself and her mother-in-law in Bethlehem by gleaning stalks of wheat that the harvesters left behind. How did she do that? No, she did not sneak into the field under cover of darkness and steal the leftover stalks of grain. The landowner, Boaz, allowed her to come and glean. Why would he do that? He was Jewish and he was following the Jewish law as put forth in Deuteronomy: When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the alien....in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands." In other ways, too, Ruth was treated kindly. That is because the other Jews with whom she came into contact honored Jewish law. We have that law recorded also in Deuteronomy. God says, "You shall love the stranger, for you (yourselves) were once strangers in the land of Egypt."

As I said, this happy ending to Ruth had no parallel in reality. The Babylonians who followed their loved ones back to Judah were not welcomed. There was a movement afoot to purify the Jewish race, and so foreigners were treated with hostility. New Jewish laws forced the dissolution of marriages between Babylonians and Jews. The families who had once sung 100 bottles of wine on the wall were now singing farewell dirges. Disillusioned Babylonians had to turn around and head back to their blood relatives in

Babylon leaving loved ones behind; that or Jews who had spent a lifetime looking forward to returning home, had to leave their homeland for good, in order to keep their families intact. It is the feeling of many commentators and it is the feeling of this theologian as well that the story of Ruth is an allegory—an allegory and also a hard-hitting commentary. The author is saying, “Don’t you know? God wants us to treat foreigners with compassion. Don’t do this horrible thing that you are doing! Don’t you remember? God said, you shall LOVE the stranger?”

I said that we have here a story within a story within a story. So far I have told you only two stories—the story of Ruth, which as I said, is an allegory slash commentary and story two, the very sad by true story of Judah, after the return of the Jews from exile.

There is one more story I want to share with you. We are now down to the bitter skin in our chestnut analogy—and that’s appropriate because this is a bitter story. It is our own story, here today in 2006. Where in our world are strangers not welcome in a foreign land? The answer, of course, is right here in the US—especially we do not welcome our neighbors, the Mexicans, who are coming here looking for work. Have you heard? Now the US will be putting up a fence at the border—this in addition to the wall and Border police, patrol towers and patrol helicopters. It seems that some of us have not been reading our Bibles!

And now for the nut! The nut is us! Note, I did not say we are nuts! I’ve got to tell you that I am very proud to be associated with this congregation – a congregation that is doing so much to bring care and comfort to the stranger in our midst. With Polly’s leadership this year we collected sheets and mattresses for the immigrants who are living in a migrant camp in Coveseville. In our preschool today we have on scholarship two Mexican American children whose parents are recent immigrants. In this, we are really just continuing a long tradition of caring for the stranger. For many years we ran a school right here on our property for migrant children. Folks, again, I say, we are the nut. We are living out our faith by doing God’s will in the world. What an extraordinary amount of work, and what an extraordinary amount of witnessing for such a small church!

The book of Ruth affirms that God loves the stranger and so should we. We are doing just that here at Cove. Amen

