

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“The Stories We Tell”
Ruth; Ezra 9 and 10.
June 19, 2012
For the Aftermath of the Shooting in an Orlando Gay Bar.**

I know that this last week had all of you thinking about and praying about the same issue: ***Can the Cardinals catch up with the Cubs or not?*** It's pretty serious stuff for you all. I know.

Of course, the Royals aren't in such a precarious position. So, don't worry. You can always join Kansas City's fan club this year again. I mean as much as you love your team, I know that deep down inside you really like to wear blue in October. You're just afraid to admit it to yourself... because you know it's dangerous around here this time of the year. Wearing a Royals ball cap will get you some dirty looks. I know from experience.

But hey, at least I'm not a Cubs fan, right? So, can we just all agree that the Cubs are the real problem. In fact, maybe we should get a city ordinance going that says if we see someone wearing a Cubs cap, it's OK to toss them in the river.

That'd be fun, wouldn't it?

After all, they are the ones defiling our city.

So, let's focus on them...

so you're not focusing on me anymore. I mean, you know what they say,
“The best way to avoid becoming a scapegoat is to find one.”¹

So, let's just stay focused on those Cubs, OK? It's not hard to know who to blame for the Card's problems. The one thing you can be sure of is that ***we've got to*** blame ***someone***... and so we're going to figure out who it should be.

Who to blame...

when your side is loosing? the coach or the players? finances or fate?

...who to blame when you loose your job?

the boss? wall street? the president?

...who to blame when chaos erupts?

when people die?

when tragedy strikes?

We're going to find someone to blame... and chances are, it's going to be **“those people I already don't trust, or don't like, or am suspicious of.”**

There's been a lot of that this week, hasn't there? We like easy targets and simple answers. So the first things we try to do is figure out who to blame for what happened in

¹ Warren Eyster, The Goblins of Eros

Orlando. But this is one isn't so easy... because it's deeply connected... deeply rooted... in not just one, but three of our on-going national conversations.

- 1) Our conversation around immigration and terrorism,
- 2) around gun violence
- 3) and around our relationship with LGBT people.

In one moment, in one act by one man, we have victims who embody all three of these things. And everyone is trying to figure out who to blame:

The NRA or ISIS,
Democrats or Republicans?
Islam, Christianity, or all religions?

This morning in the midst of all these questions and shouting voices about what happened, the scriptures give us two ancient stories, separated by about 800 years. One from Ruth and one from Ezra.

Ruth comes from the time of the Judges, when the 12 tribes had settled the Promised Land, but before there were ever any Kings of Israel. It's before the time of Samuel and Saul and David. In fact, Ruth becomes the great-grandma of King David. It's part of why her story matters so much.

Ezra's story, on the other hand, comes generations later, after the time of the kings, after Israel's heyday, in the time after they've been in exile and are now returning home from exile.

Like I said, Ruth and Ezra are separated by 800 years **chronologically**. But **theologically**, they are separated by two competing ideologies. They are pushing against each other. And they are held here in our scriptures so we'll have to wrestle with them too.

As we heard earlier, Ruth is a Moabite woman, who marries an Israelite, the son of Naomi. When Naomi's husband and son die, she decides to return to Israel, to Bethlehem, to her home. But she tells her foreign-daughter-in-law to go back home.

Ruth... refuses.

We don't know exactly how Naomi felt about this, being that both her sons died when married to Moabite women. But welcome or not, Ruth goes with her mother-in-law back to Naomi's home.

In other words, Ruth is a foreigner in the Promised Land. She's an immigrant who wasn't invited to come to Israel.... And to top it all off she wasn't just any foreigner. ***She was a Moabite.***

The Moabites are, what you might call, a different sort of people... not the kind of people you want to have around. If we were to flip back to Genesis 19, we'd find that

story where Sodom and Gomorrah was being destroyed. And you might remember that Lot and his family were warned by an angel to flee the city, and not look back. And so they fled Sodom and Gomorrah for their lives. But Lot's wife turned, and looked back.. When she did, she became a pillar of salt.

You may have learned the story in Sunday School along the way. In fact, you probably had a coloring sheet of Lot's family. And you got to color in Lot and his two daughters. But Lot's wife, you had to color in with a glue stick and sprinkle salt on her to remember what she became....

It's just a guess. The one thing I'm sure of is that's the point where you stopped reading in Sunday School. I mean, you never hear much about the last part of chapter 19... because... well, what happens next... is not Sunday School appropriate.

Lot and his two daughters flee to the mountains and live in a cave. His daughters are what you might call, **"The young and the restless."** There's no men around. There's no one to help them carry on the family line. And as far as they can tell, it looks like the world has been destroyed. Who knows, maybe humanity, is coming to an end.

Lot's daughters come up with a crazy plan.

They get their father completely drunk. Once he's wasted, they sleep with him in order to get pregnant. It works and they each have a son by their father. The youngest daughter names her boy Ben-Ammi... and he becomes the father of the Ammonites...

The eldest daughter, who came up with the whole plan, named her son... Moab... and he became the father of the Moabites... The Moabites are the people born from an incestuous relationship.

So, let's just say, Israel didn't have a very high opinion of their neighbor's, the Moabites. I imagine they had colorful words for people like Ruth, for the decedents of Moab. Words like: **Ewww!**

The fact that Ruth is a Moabite, is no trivial matter. In fact, the narrator keeps reminding us to make sure we get it: Chapter 1 ends, "Naomi returned from **Moab** accompanied by Ruth the Moabite."

Chapter 2 verse 2: "Ruth the Moabite..."

vs. 6, when Boaz asks who she is, he's told: "She is the Moabite who came back from Moab."

In other words... don't forget for one minute where she's from. She's a Moabite. Gross! What's she doing here?

And if that wasn't bad enough, she's here tapping into Israel's welfare system. She's a drain on society. You see, by law, the landowners like Boaz were supposed to leave scraps in the field so that the destitute, the widows and orphans, could come behind the harvesters in pick up scraps.

Remember, if you had no husband or no sons in that culture, you had no hope of survival, no power, no means of making money other than maybe prostitution. So, this was one way they as a society were supposed to help the poor. “Leave some scraps in the fields” Deuteronomy tells them.

Naomi has lost her husband and her two sons. All she’s left with is her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. And Ruth, she’s far from home. She’s lost her husband, and has no one left but her... helpless mother-in-law

...giving her instructions
...telling her what to do,
... and what not to do
... and how to do it better
... all the time. (I imagine their house was a fun place to be!)

Together, Naomi and Ruth, they’re at the bottom of society... scraping by.

And so Ruth, the foreigner, the Moabite, goes out into the field, to pick up scraps that were left there for **Israel’s** poor, not for **her**. She’s a drain on their welfare system.

Of course, as the story goes on, she catches the eye of Boaz, and one night during the harvest... ***she catches his breath.***

Ruth sneaks onto the threshing floor, where woman are not allowed. But she’s waits until all the men are all drunk and falling asleep. Boaz is one of them. He’s drunk... and with all kinds of evocative language and Hebrew innuendos, we hear about Ruth uncovering Boaz’ “feet” and laying down with him...

But, that’s what you should expect from a Moabite woman, isn’t it? Taking advantage of Boaz when he’s drunk.

And even convincing him to marry her! Can you imagine? That’d be like a Mizzou Tiger marrying a Kansas Jayhawk. Just think, what kind of half-breed children are they going to have? Some kind of Tiger-Hawk?

But, like I said, their children are part of the point. This is King David’s heritage. His great grandma is

an uninvited immigrant
with a sexually deviant heritage,
who is draining on the social welfare of God’s people,
who seduced an upstanding citizen of Bethlehem.

That’s not exactly how they taught you the story in VBS is it? But it’s true.

In fact, the more you think about it, it’s surprising that they didn’t kick Ruth out of Dodge. She was defiling God’s people. Seems like it would be pretty easy to come to the conclusion that the best thing to do would have been to either lock her up or kick her out of the Promised Land. Don’t you think?

That's exactly the conclusion that Ezra comes to in his day. 800 years later, he returns to the Promised Land from being in exile. When he looks around, he sees that the people of God have intermarried with all these foreign woman... and they have these mixed up families... with half breed children...

You see, a lot of the exiles have been back for some time now, but things aren't what they hoped they would be, and they really want to **"Make Israel Great Again..."**

According to Ezra, the only way to do that is purify the people,
to get rid of all these foreigners, those foreign wives and half breed children running around defiling God's people.

So, that's what they decide to do. In fact, everyone has to get rid of them. It doesn't matter if you've been married to your wife for 5 months or 50 years. She's got to go... and so does all those little half-breeds of hers.

"I know it sounds harsh," Ezra says. **"But it's really the only way. Get rid of them, and life will be good again. I promise!"**

It's the oldest tendency in the book. It goes all the way back to Adam and Eve. **"It was this woman you gave me,"** Adam tells God. She's the problem.

Scapegoat someone else, and especially the minority.

It's so easy. It's as ancient and commonplace as it gets. Make someone else the problem... and you never have to deal with your own darkness.

In fact there's a very simple formula that's still being used today. Make "them/those people" the problem. Wrap your solution up in religious justification. And you can pretty much get away with murder.

That's exactly what Ezra does. To send these women and children away, out of the protection of their families and community, was a death sentence. But according to the book of Ezra, it's what must be done.

Truth be told, this is nothing less than ethnic cleansing... and it's right here justified in our scriptures. Of course, not everyone wants to acknowledge that this is what's happening, because they are afraid it makes us look bad. You can find all kinds of Christian and Jewish scholars that will try to explain away the book of Ezra.

But they are not being very honest, and I don't think they are doing any of us a favor. In fact, I wonder if the book of Ezra is here exactly to make us embarrassed, and to make us push back against this kind of "Purity and Holiness" ideology.

Maybe this story has been saved, not to tell us what to do, but so that our own scriptures can remind us that *this has been our sin as well*. This is still our temptation today. *Our beloved faith in God has also been twisted to enact great violence on the foreigner and on any people group we've decided "defile" us.*

Well... thanks be to God there were a few in Ezra's day that tried to protest. There were four men who tried to stand against the tide. But no one listened. They lost the argument.

But, I wondered, if these four men sat around the campfires at night with their neighbors and their children and their grandchildren, and told them the ancient story of Ruth, the Moabite... the foreign woman... who seduce Boaz and became his wife.

And every time, they made sure to end the story by reminding them that Ruth also had a half-breed child... and that this child was the redemption of her mother-in-law, Naomi. Did you catch that at the end of the story? When Naomi's grandson is born the people of their village say, "Naomi has a son again!" Naomi is finally redeemed.

Not only that, but that half-breed child grew and became the grandpa of King David, the greatest king in all of Israel... King David, who's line will reign on the throne forever

Of course, none of that would have happened if Boaz had kick Ruth, the Moabite, out of his field... or if Boaz hadn't chosen to marry and redeem Ruth the Moabite after that night on the threshing floor.

But thanks be to God, he did. He embraced her... He made her part of his family. Because by doing so, Ruth became the womb of Israel's redemption. That Moabite woman, became the womb of our salvation.

And so, I have to ask, what story are we telling, sitting around campfires and coffee shops, in living rooms and board rooms? In the aftermath of Orlando, in the midst of all the shouting about immigration policy and our Muslim brothers and sisters, and those who identify as LGBT, are we speaking as Boaz or Ezra?

And in the midst of our lives, going about our business, will we look for the Ruths who are gleaning in our own fields and risk being her redeemer? Or will we see her as a defiling presence that must be eliminated?

Will we speak up for her? If we do, we may just find that she will become the womb of our own redemption too.

Here's what I do know... and I hope you're remember. You and I, we were strangers and foreigners to the Kingdom of God. Jesus came to expose our darkness and offer us the radical love of God given to us.

But rather than recognizing all the darkness in ourselves, we turned him into a scapegoat. We projected our evil onto him. We made Jesus the problem that needed getting rid of, and we crucified him. **The pattern continued.**

But God's love and redemption broke the pattern... and showed the world just how bankrupt it is. God raised him from the dead, revealing just how wrong we can be... even in our religious convictions.

Thanks be to God, even after we crucified him, Jesus offers us forgiveness for our sins, and invites us still into his kingdom.... a kingdom of love and radical grace.

You and I...

we have been, and truth be told, often still are,
the defiling foreigners.

But there is good news. Jesus, the Moabite woman's great-great-great grandson, has become our redeemer.

He welcomes all of us...

no matter who we are,
no matter how defiled we think we've been,
not matter how dead wrong and hard hearted we have been...
he invites all of us into the beloved community... of God's healing grace.

And this same Jesus, asks us to invite, to welcome, to embrace... everyone one else into this beloved community as well. This is the glorious, beautiful, upside-down Kingdom of God.

Amen.

Silent Reflection

"At that time you were without Christ. You were aliens rather than citizens of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of God's promise. In this world you had no hope and no God. But now, thanks to Christ Jesus, you who once were so far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. Christ himself is our peace.... "

~Ephesians 2:12-14