

Message for October 31, 2021

Ruth 1:11-18

As we may remember, a couple of weeks ago our Premier set off a small firestorm of controversy when he made some comments about immigrants coming to Ontario, saying that they should be prepared to work hard. His comments were interpreted by many to mean that many immigrants do not work hard, and this set off an immediate reaction ranging from approval to accusations that his language and phrasing shows that he is anti-immigrant and possibly worse. My weekly message of course is not the place to analyze what the Premier did or did not mean; it is enough to say that this episode shows what a 'hot button' topic immigration is for many people. Behind all of the debate and controversy though lies a fundamental issue and that is how we as a society should relate to our immigrants and minorities.

It has been said that generally speaking, societies relate to their immigrants and minorities in one of three ways which are often called the three 'A's'. The first 'A' is accommodation or, if we prefer, acceptance. In this approach the minority group can keep its language, culture, and traditions provided that they are not illegal or pose a danger to the larger society. To put it tongue in cheek, with this approach some people may eat pulled pork and listen to country music, other people may eat tacos and listen to a mariachi band, while yet others may eat curry and listen to a zither. And as for me? I'll stick to haggis and bagpipes!

The second 'A' is that of assimilation and with this approach the majority believes that its immigrants and minorities should become just like them. The third 'A' takes this one step further and it is aggressive. With this approach the larger society doesn't just say that immigrants and minorities *should* be like the majority; it *demand*s that they will be. And if people will not agree to this, then the attitude quite simply is that they shouldn't have come here in the first place.

The three "A's"; accommodation, assimilation or aggression describe the ways in which most societies relate to their immigrants and minorities but of course there is nothing new in this. Indeed while it may not be obvious at first, majority-minority relations is the issue behind today's scripture passage.

It was the “Time of Judges” which was a lawless era when no king ruled over Israel and violence was everywhere. Famine also stalked the land and so an Israelite named Elimelech decided to take his family and leave the Promised Land altogether. Elimelech along with his wife Naomi and their two boys left Israel and settled down in the neighbouring country of Moab. Not long after their arrival Elimelech died but Naomi and the boys stayed in Moab and even started putting down roots when the boys married local girls. Then however, tragedy struck again when both of Naomi’s sons got sick and died. Feeling alone in a foreign land, Naomi decided that it was time for her to go back to Israel. Her daughters-in-law didn’t want her to go but Naomi was insistent; she was going back home but they should stay in Moab where they belonged.

One of the young women sadly agreed to stay but the other young woman, named Ruth, would have no part of it. As she said in words that have become famous:

“Where you go, I will go and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.”

The two women left Moab and went back to Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem. Without a man to look after them though, life was very hard. Back then of course there weren’t any social assistance programmes or food banks. What the desperately poor people such as Naomi and Ruth were allowed to do however was comb over the farmer’s fields after the crops had been harvested. In fact every farmer was expected to leave a part of their crop behind to feed the poor, and this was how Naomi and Ruth survived.

According to the story, one day Ruth was walking behind the reapers in a field that belonged to a distant kinsman of Naomi, a rich man named Boaz. Ruth caught Boaz’s eye and he gave instructions that some of the crop was to be left behind just for her. Naomi, realizing that Boaz had taken a fancy to Ruth and knowing that he was single, urged Ruth to pursue him. And so in the end, to make a long story short, Ruth and Boaz fell in love, got married and had a child. They also took Naomi in, and they all lived happily ever after.

This briefly is the story of Ruth and what a wonderful heart-warming story it is! When we think about it though, we might well wonder why this sweet

sentimental story that hardly ever refers to God, is in the Bible. The answer to this lies in *when* it was decided to include it.

It was about six hundred years after Ruth and the others had lived. The Babylonian Exile was over and God's people had returned home to Israel. They had been gone for decades and in their absence people of other races and religions had moved in. Despite all of their differences though, most of the people got along and perhaps what happened next was inevitable. People of different ethnic groups socialized with one another and some of the young people fell in love, got married and had families. The Jewish authorities in Jerusalem however found this unacceptable and felt that something had to be done to stop it. They reasoned that if this was allowed to continue then they, the people of God, might be assimilated and perhaps even disappear altogether! Laws were passed then forbidding inter-faith and inter-racial marriages. And as for those Jews who had already married 'foreigners'? The authorities decided that it didn't matter how long a couple had been married or whether or not they had children, they now had to get a divorce. In short, the authorities opted for aggression rather than accommodation or assimilation when it came to their minorities.

Much to their dismay the authorities soon discovered that there were many who objected to the new marriage laws. Those who favoured being more tolerant pointed to the old story of Ruth and in particular its ending.

The child of Ruth and Boaz was a son named Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse who in turn was the father of David. To put it another way Ruth, the foreigner, was a great-grandmother of David who was of course the greatest king in Israel's history. And to take this even one step further, Ruth was an ancestor of Jesus himself since Jesus was born of the house of David. And that quite simply is why the story of Ruth is in the Bible. It is the voice of tolerance and it is a reminder of how we, the people of God, should relate to those who are different from ourselves. We are not to drive them out but rather to bring them in. I like the way a person once put it; instead of building higher walls, we Christians should be building longer tables. Indeed, who knows how God may be working through and by them? The story of Ruth is a reminder that there is only one God and that he is active in the lives of all of us, and as different as we may be, we have all been created in his image and are his dearly beloved children. The truth is that God loves and cares about *all* of his children and if we

would truly be the disciples of Christ, then we will strive to do the same. With this in mind, I would like to end this message by sharing a true story with you.

A young woman named Sally attended a Bible college and one of her teachers, Brother Smith, was known for his elaborate object lessons. One day when Sally walked into the class, she saw a big target on the wall and beside it was a table with darts sitting on it. Brother Smith told the students to draw a picture of someone they thoroughly disliked. After they had all done so, they took turns placing their pictures on the target and throwing darts at them. The students had a great time doing this and the room was filled with laughter. Sally herself was at the back of the line and was very disappointed when Brother Smith, because of time limits, asked the students to return to their seats before she had had her turn.

The classroom had been quite chaotic during the dart throwing exercise but then Brother Smith removed the target. Underneath it was a ripped and torn picture of Jesus. A complete hush fell over the room as the students looked at it and realized that every time they had thrown a dart at their perceived enemy, they had also thrown a dart at Jesus himself. Brother Smith then ended the lesson with these words quoting Christ himself, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did unto one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did unto me".

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, hear us as we come to you in prayer on this, the last day of October.

We praise you and thank you for the gift of this month drawing to its close, characterized as it is by the beauty and goodness of your creation. We thank you for the gift of the month about to begin as well: a time of remembrance, and a time of anticipation with Christmas seemingly just around the corner.

Even though we are still living with the pandemic and its restrictions, we thank you that things are returning more and more to a sense of normalcy in our lives and in the world around us. We pray for the safety and well-being of all,

remembering too those who have lost so much including their loved ones, health, livelihoods, and a sense of security.

On this Reformation Sunday, we thank you for your church and especially our own reformed tradition. We thank you for those who have gone before us in the faith, going all the way back to the days of the Bible itself. Grant, we pray, that we may be inspired by their faith and example. Grant too that we may keep faith with those who have gone before us and the legacy that they have entrusted to us; to be reformed and always reforming, to do our best but always striving to do better, secure in your love and forgiveness at those times when we are less than successful.

We pray this day for all who are weighed down by illness, grief, worry, and fear. We pray that they may find peace and healing by turning their burdens of care over to you.

On this autumn day we pray for the sake of your good creation after the way we human beings have not only used it but abused it. As the pace of global warming and climate change picks up speed with all its implications, we pray that something good and constructive may come out of the conference now being held in Scotland. Grant wisdom and courage to those in positions of authority and grant the same to the rest of us as well, that we may care for your creation, both for our own sakes and that of the generations yet to come.

We ask these things in your Son's name, He who is the mighty redeemer of everyone and everything. Amen