

Persistent Faith
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
 November 3, 2018

Ruth 1: 1 - 17

¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;
 your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

¹⁷Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Ruth was wrong. According to the laws of the Bible, she was legally and morally wrong. It started when she, a Moabite woman, met and married an Israelite man, Mahlon.

Biblical laws forbade such a match.

Why did Naomi permit such a thing? Certainly, she knew the law, but likely it was a matter of practicality. Naomi and her husband had fled to Moab to escape a famine. Wouldn't they have considered Moab to be their home and were not planning a return to Judah? And after her husband's death, this likely became even more of a truth for Naomi and her sons.

She did not foresee a famine coming to Moab.

Did not foresee the illness that would take the lives of her sons, Mahlon and Chilion.

Some ancient interpreters understood these deaths as punishment for breaking the law, but more modern interpretation sees their deaths as an indication that famine and disease have now come to Moab.

But as happens so often, and maybe you can relate, it is the unexpected that this family has to deal with. Once Naomi realizes that her survival depends on a return to Judah, she knows that it will be difficult, because in Judah she cannot hide her family's transgressions.

Judah was her chance for survival because, without a husband or sons, there was no one in Moab to care for her. In Judah her husband's family would have been required to accept responsibility for her. But it did not require that of Moabites, related by marriage or not.

In Israel, in Judah, Moabites were not only not welcome, they were disliked. They were discriminated against. They were, according to Deuteronomy (23:3), prohibited from ever being a part of the Israelite community, marrying Israelite men or women, laws reaffirmed later in Ezra (9:1-4) and Nehemiah (13:23-27).

These were not laws intended to be cruel, they were intended to protect, preserve, and maintain the Israelite people and land.

So when Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah to return to their parents, she is looking out for them. She is following the law. It is not because she wants them to leave, she is being unselfish. Orpah, sees this wisdom. It is apparent she does not want to leave her mother-in-law, but she abides by her mother-in-law's wishes and departs.

Ruth does not see things with the same eyes.

And she will not leave.

She is wrong. Legally. Morally. But... not faithfully.

Ruth does stay, and her disobedience leads to the birth of a son who is a direct ancestor of Jesus.

And what we are being shown here is the difference between laws and relationship. Instead of allowing relationships to be defined by laws, Ruth insists through her actions that laws should be guided by relationships. Relationship is the gold standard here.

One commentator writes:¹

Written in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the story is a politically subversive pamphlet. No one with the desire to shock his or her Israelite readership could have chosen a "hero" more controversial, even repulsive, than a woman from Moab. Moreover, as if it were not scandalous enough to have that personage of the drama helping and, literally, nourishing an Israelite, the story intends to show that the sociopolitical tension introduced by the unwelcome presence of the foreigner in the community will be resolved, not by the expulsion but by the marriage of the Moabites with Boaz.

This text tells us that when the unwelcome foreigner comes our way, not only are we to welcome them, but that God will use them in ways greater than we can imagine. In this case, it leads to the Messiah.

¹ LaCocque, Andre. *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. Page 99-100. Quoted in *Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* by Alice Ogden Bellis.

And if this seems a little bit current given the news of recent weeks, it's worth noting that the commentary I quoted was written thirty years ago, but Ruth was written thousands of years ago. Is there anything new under the sun? Maybe we can find comfort in knowing that the issues we face in terms of borders and immigration are the same issues people of faith have faced for thousands of years. And maybe we can find inspiration in Ruth's example, her willingness to be guided by relationship over anything else.

She is in a relationship with Naomi. And either she sees that she needs Naomi or that Naomi needs her, or that, maybe, they need each other, she allows that human relationship to take precedence over everything else.

Isn't this one of the great Biblical values? It's bigger than Ruth, isn't it?

Ruth, who will give birth to the grandfather of David, in whose line Jesus will be—

Jesus, who healed a man on the sabbath.

Jesus, who talked to the woman at the well.

Jesus, who touched lepers.

Jesus, who, when the crowd wanted to stone a woman caught in adultery forced the crowd to see her as sister, as human, and it changed everything.

Isn't this what Jesus teaches us, to value and invest in relationships, and to allow that to inform everything else, and not the other way around?

The table where Jesus gathered, it wasn't about policy, it was about relationship, and even the one who would betray him was included.

The command to eat and drink and remember, isn't about policy, it is about re-membering ourselves as the Body of Christ, a body of welcome, a body of relationships.

And it reminds me of the scandal created by Shane Windmeyer and Dan Cathy a few years ago. Shane Windmeyer is an activist for equality, founder and director of Campus pride, and a gay man who has been married to his husband for more than 20 years.

Dan Cathy is the CEO of Chick-Fil-A, who was quite public at the time about his belief that the life of faith does not include and cannot sanctify same-sex relationships.

And, at the time, Chick-Fil-A was in the news for their corporate donations going towards organizations that actively encouraged Cathy's beliefs.

Both sides spoke loudly about how they felt- there were protests and counter protests. Statements and counter statements.

And right when this controversy was at its highest volume, that was when Dan Kathy called Shane Widmeyer on the phone. Out of the blue. Shane didn't know why Dan was calling. They didn't know one another And Shane wasn't at all sure he should take the call, but he did.

Shane tells it:²

The first call lasted over an hour, and the private conversation led to more calls the next week and the week after. Dan Cathy knew how to text, and he would

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-l-windmeyer/dan-cathy-chick-fil-a_b_2564379.html
Retrieved January 28, 2013.

reach out to me as new questions came to his mind. This was not going to be a typical turn of events.

His questions and a series of deeper conversations ultimately led to a number of in-person meetings with Dan and representatives from Chick-fil-A. He had never before had such dialogue with any member of the LGBT community. It was awkward at times but always genuine and kind.

It is not often that people with deeply held and completely opposing viewpoints actually risk sitting down and listening to one another.....

Never once did Dan or anyone from Chick-fil-A ask for Campus Pride to stop protesting Chick-fil-A. On the contrary, Dan listened intently to our concerns and the real-life accounts from youth about the negative impact that Chick-fil-A was having on campus climate and safety at colleges across the country.

Dan.... had to both hold to his beliefs and welcome me into them. He had to face the issue of respecting my viewpoints and life even while not being able to reconcile them with his belief system. He defined this to me as "the blessing of growth." He expanded his world without abandoning it. I did, as well.

As Dan and I grew through mutual dialogue and respect, he invited me to be his personal guest on New Year's Eve at the Chick-fil-A Bowl. This was an event that Campus Pride and others had planned to protest. Had I been played?.... No. It was Dan who took a great risk in inviting me: He stood to face the ire of his conservative base (and a potential boycott) by being seen or photographed with an LGBT activist.....

Instead, he stood next to me most of the night, putting respect ahead of fear. There we were on the sidelines, Dan, his wife, his family and friends and I, all enjoying the game.....How much better would our world be if more could do the same?

How do we respond when someone challenges our values? Our beliefs?

The easiest thing in the world is to withdraw into our assumptions, to defend out assumptions all the louder, but that's not the faithful thing, is it?

Aren't we, called to do what Ruth did? What Jesus did?
And dig deeper into getting to know our neighbors? To commit to walking along side them, breaking bread and seeing the light of God in them?

It takes us to tables, doesn't it. Tables of conversation. Tables like the one to which Jesus invites us. Tables like the ones around which we will gather this afternoon. And from there to the tables and the living rooms of your own homes. When we show that same persistent faith that Ruth showed, and value relationships.

Which leaves me with an important realization. There are some people I need to be inviting and welcoming at my table.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Persistent Faith
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
 November 3, 2018

Ruth 1: 1 - 17

¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶But Ruth said,

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;
 your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

¹⁷Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried.

May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Ruth was wrong. According to the laws of the Bible, she was legally and morally wrong. It started when she, a Moabite woman, met and married an Israelite man, Mahlon.

Biblical laws forbade such a match.

Why did Naomi permit such a thing? Certainly, she knew the law, but likely it was a matter of practicality. Naomi and her husband had fled to Moab to escape a famine. Wouldn't they have considered Moab to be their home and were not planning a return to Judah? And after her husband's death, this likely became even more of a truth for Naomi and her sons.

She did not foresee a famine coming to Moab.

Did not foresee the illness that would take the lives of her sons, Mahlon and Chilion.

Some ancient interpreters understood these deaths as punishment for breaking the law, but more modern interpretation sees their deaths as an indication that famine and disease have now come to Moab.

But as happens so often, and maybe you can relate, it is the unexpected that this family has to deal with. Once Naomi realizes that her survival depends on a return to Judah, she knows that it will be difficult, because in Judah she cannot hide her family's transgressions.

Judah was her chance for survival because, without a husband or sons, there was no one in Moab to care for her. In Judah her husband's family would have been required to accept responsibility for her. But it did not require that of Moabites, related by marriage or not.

In Israel, in Judah, Moabites were not only not welcome, they were disliked. They were discriminated against. They were, according to Deuteronomy (23:3), prohibited from ever being a part of the Israelite community, marrying Israelite men or women, laws reaffirmed later in Ezra (9:1-4) and Nehemiah (13:23-27).

These were not laws intended to be cruel, they were intended to protect, preserve, and maintain the Israelite people and land.

So when Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah to return to their parents, she is looking out for them. She is following the law. It is not because she wants them to leave, she is being unselfish. Orpah, sees this wisdom. It is apparent she does not want to leave her mother-in-law, but she abides by her mother-in-law's wishes and departs.

Ruth does not see things with the same eyes.

And she will not leave.

She is wrong. Legally. Morally. But... not faithfully.

Ruth does stay, and her disobedience leads to the birth of a son who is a direct ancestor of Jesus.

And what we are being shown here is the difference between laws and relationship. Instead of allowing relationships to be defined by laws, Ruth insists through her actions that laws should be guided by relationships. Relationship is the gold standard here.

One commentator writes:¹

Written in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the story is a politically subversive pamphlet. No one with the desire to shock his or her Israelite readership could have chosen a "hero" more controversial, even repulsive, than a woman from Moab. Moreover, as if it were not scandalous enough to have that personage of the drama helping and, literally, nourishing an Israelite, the story intends to show that the sociopolitical tension introduced by the unwelcome presence of the foreigner in the community will be resolved, not by the expulsion but by the marriage of the Moabites with Boaz.

This text tells us that when the unwelcome foreigner comes our way, not only are we to welcome them, but that God will use them in ways greater than we can imagine. In this case, it leads to the Messiah.

¹ LaCocque, Andre. *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990. Page 99-100. Quoted in *Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* by Alice Ogden Bellis.

And if this seems a little bit current given the news of recent weeks, it's worth noting that the commentary I quoted was written thirty years ago, but Ruth was written thousands of years ago. Is there anything new under the sun? Maybe we can find comfort in knowing that the issues we face in terms of borders and immigration are the same issues people of faith have faced for thousands of years. And maybe we can find inspiration in Ruth's example, her willingness to be guided by relationship over anything else.

She is in a relationship with Naomi. And either she sees that she needs Naomi or that Naomi needs her, or that, maybe, they need each other, she allows that human relationship to take precedence over everything else.

Isn't this one of the great Biblical values? It's bigger than Ruth, isn't it?

Ruth, who will give birth to the grandfather of David, in whose line Jesus will be—

Jesus, who healed a man on the sabbath.

Jesus, who talked to the woman at the well.

Jesus, who touched lepers.

Jesus, who, when the crowd wanted to stone a woman caught in adultery forced the crowd to see her as sister, as human, and it changed everything.

Isn't this what Jesus teaches us, to value and invest in relationships, and to allow that to inform everything else, and not the other way around?

The table where Jesus gathered, it wasn't about policy, it was about relationship, and even the one who would betray him was included.

The command to eat and drink and remember, isn't about policy, it is about re-membering ourselves as the Body of Christ, a body of welcome, a body of relationships.

And it reminds me of the scandal created by Shane Windmeyer and Dan Cathy a few years ago. Shane Windmeyer is an activist for equality, founder and director of Campus pride, and a gay man who has been married to his husband for more than 20 years.

Dan Cathy is the CEO of Chick-Fil-A, who was quite public at the time about his belief that the life of faith does not include and cannot sanctify same-sex relationships.

And, at the time, Chick-Fil-A was in the news for their corporate donations going towards organizations that actively encouraged Cathy's beliefs.

Both sides spoke loudly about how they felt- there were protests and counter protests. Statements and counter statements.

And right when this controversy was at its highest volume, that was when Dan Kathy called Shane Widmeyer on the phone. Out of the blue. Shane didn't know why Dan was calling. They didn't know one another And Shane wasn't at all sure he should take the call, but he did.

Shane tells it:²

The first call lasted over an hour, and the private conversation led to more calls the next week and the week after. Dan Cathy knew how to text, and he would

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/shane-l-windmeyer/dan-cathy-chick-fil-a_b_2564379.html
Retrieved January 28, 2013.

reach out to me as new questions came to his mind. This was not going to be a typical turn of events.

His questions and a series of deeper conversations ultimately led to a number of in-person meetings with Dan and representatives from Chick-fil-A. He had never before had such dialogue with any member of the LGBT community. It was awkward at times but always genuine and kind.

It is not often that people with deeply held and completely opposing viewpoints actually risk sitting down and listening to one another.....

Never once did Dan or anyone from Chick-fil-A ask for Campus Pride to stop protesting Chick-fil-A. On the contrary, Dan listened intently to our concerns and the real-life accounts from youth about the negative impact that Chick-fil-A was having on campus climate and safety at colleges across the country.

Dan.... had to both hold to his beliefs and welcome me into them. He had to face the issue of respecting my viewpoints and life even while not being able to reconcile them with his belief system. He defined this to me as "the blessing of growth." He expanded his world without abandoning it. I did, as well.

As Dan and I grew through mutual dialogue and respect, he invited me to be his personal guest on New Year's Eve at the Chick-fil-A Bowl. This was an event that Campus Pride and others had planned to protest. Had I been played?.... No. It was Dan who took a great risk in inviting me: He stood to face the ire of his conservative base (and a potential boycott) by being seen or photographed with an LGBT activist.....

Instead, he stood next to me most of the night, putting respect ahead of fear. There we were on the sidelines, Dan, his wife, his family and friends and I, all enjoying the game.....How much better would our world be if more could do the same?

How do we respond when someone challenges our values? Our beliefs?

The easiest thing in the world is to withdraw into our assumptions, to defend out assumptions all the louder, but that's not the faithful thing, is it?

Aren't we, called to do what Ruth did? What Jesus did?
And dig deeper into getting to know our neighbors? To commit to walking along side them, breaking bread and seeing the light of God in them?

It takes us to tables, doesn't it. Tables of conversation. Tables like the one to which Jesus invites us. Tables like the ones around which we will gather this afternoon. And from there to the tables and the living rooms of your own homes. When we show that same persistent faith that Ruth showed, and value relationships.

Which leaves me with an important realization. There are some people I need to be inviting and welcoming at my table.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.