

Walk in Love

With thanks to Carla Pratt Keyes

Proper 26B
Mark 12: 28-34
Ruth 1:1-18

No one leaves home
unless home is the mouth of a shark
You only run for the boarder
When you see the whole city running as well

Your neighbors running faster than you
Breath bloody in their throats

The boy you went to school with
Who kissed you dizzy behind the old tin factory
Is holding a gun bigger than his body
You only leave home
When home wont let you stay

No one leaves home unless home chases you
Fire under feet
Hot blood in your belly
It's not something you ever thought of doing
Until the blade burnt threats into
You neck...

This is a part of a poem written by Warsan Shire, a man born to Somali parents in Kenya. He is writing about the violence and desperation of a people forced to leave their home. He is writing about the reality of being a refugee when there are no other options for your life. This is something we know nothing about, we are fortunate. But it is a reality for many who risk crossing the boarder into the U.S. because life in Mexico or South America is horrific, is grim. They would rather risk their lives fleeing than remain in their own home. The same is true for Syrian or Afghan refugees fleeing to Turkey or into Europe. The same was true for Joseph and Mary. The same is true for Elimelech and Naomi. Some flee because of war, some because of violence, some because of hunger. They leave their home because they hope to survive, to make a life for themselves, to protect their loved ones. "No one leave home unless home is the mouth of a shark."

For Elimelech and Naomi - both Jews - Judah, they're homeland, was facing a famine. They were forced to leave to find food, to survive, to care for their two young sons - they are so desperate that they will even go to Moab - a place Jews felt was God forsaken. No Jew would take their children to Moab unless they were desperate. And there was nothing to stop them from going. No laws to prohibit them, no treacherous boarder crossing, no soldiers on horseback. There was no fear of parents being separated from their children. There was no fear of children being detained in cages. In Moab they made a life for themselves.

After some time Elimelech dies and Naomi is left a widow. Her boys grow into men and they marry two Moabite women: Orpah and Ruth, and they continue to make lives for themselves for some time, ten years actually. And then Naomi's sons die unexpectedly and three widows are left to fend for themselves. Maybe our 21st Century take would be that the Book of Ruth is the story of women attempting to "make it" in a man's world. According to the story Naomi must flee for her life a second time. Naomi is an old woman, living in a foreign land; she's lost her husband and her two sons and if she is to live she believes she can only do it in Judah where her own people may help her. Naomi sets out to return to Judah and she instructs her two daughter's-in-law to stay in Moab - their homeland where they would quite likely find new husbands and begin again. These three women have been together for decades, they are a family that has experienced considerable loss. And still they consider that their best option for survival may be to lose each other. Orpah does the most sensible thing - she stays in Moab with the hope of finding a new husband and a new life as Naomi advises. Ruth does the most counter intuitive thing - she risks her life further by staying with her elderly mother-in-law. The two women make their way to Judah together and they find that the famine in Judah has ended - Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Jewish law allowed for the poor to glean the fields after the reapers had finished their work. The law required that farmers leave part of their harvest for the poor. Ruth finds food for herself and Naomi. Ruth also finds a husband in a relative of Elimelech, Naomi's husband. Boaz is a wealthy land owner

who encourages Ruth to glean in his fields. Ruth and Boaz marry. Naomi has a life; she has a home; she has a new family. Ruth bears a son and names him Obed. The Book of Ruth ends with Naomi nuzzling her new grandson and the women of the community saying, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left Naomi without next of kin. Your grandson has restored your life and will care for you in your old age, for your daughter-in-law, Ruth, loves you and she is more to you than seven sons."

Ruth's boy, Naomi's grandson, Obed, becomes the father of Jesse, who is the father of David, who is the father of Solomon - and from Solomon through I believe I counted 24 generations until there is born Joseph the husband of Mary who bore Jesus of Nazareth.

What an unassuming little story the Book of Ruth is. The books prior to Ruth are larger than life: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges.... And then we hear of three women whose lives are unraveling, who lose everything, who grieve together and attempt to make the best choices they can, who seem to make sensible choices, who seem to make risky choices, who love each other and are loyal to each other. Here is a story that shows us that just maybe "God is most powerfully at work when we are least inclined to believe it." (Carla Pratt Keyes). Yes, maybe the Book of Ruth is about women trying to make it in a man's world. And maybe its about the power of loyalty and relationship. Maybe it's about the rigor and discomfort of the love of God and neighbor. Maybe its about what real love means: vulnerability and sacrifice.