

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“Insiders and Outsiders”

Ruth

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Are you an insider or an outsider?

Insider... probably???? Inside what?

Outsider???? Outside what?

How's it feel out there? How's it feel in here?

One way to read the biblical story is that it is a story about who's in and who's out... And how those who are outside tend to be treated and how those who are outside ought to be treated...

That's part of what this lovely little story of Ruth is all about. Naomi finds herself a double outsider... in Moab and widowed all at the same time. And she decides to head back home where she won't be so outside.

And she let's her sons' wives, who are also widowed, out of their sacred commitments... they're off the hook. **“You stay here... I'm all out of sons...”** And we've heard Ruth's words a million times during ring ceremonies. (Repeat them after me.)

“Entreat me not to leave thee. Where thou goest, I will go. Where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people and thy God my God.” I now pronounce you ... kin to Naomi.

So Ruth volunteers to be an outsider for the love of Naomi. And she's there in a strange land, doing what a widow would do. They had an ethic about and a plan for taking care of the outsiders... the vulnerable. And most importantly, they had a calling to do that from Yahweh.

So, farmers didn't pick up all the grain... whatever fell to the ground was left for the poor who were usually outsiders... widows... orphans. They didn't get the leaf rake out. It'd be like you taking all your pocket change and putting it in a bowl and taking it to Crossties at the end of the month so they could buy food with it (not a bad idea, huh).

So... Ruth's out in the field and the field belongs to Boaz... who's a distant relative by marriage and it's hard to tell in the story just how much is because of duty and how much is due to romance, but Boaz winds up proposing to Ruth.

It's sort of elaborate and all by the books for the most part. Boaz has to check with someone else who was first in line to care for Naomi and Ruth. It was more of their social security.

If my brother died I'd be responsible for his wife and would marry her... and if I couldn't, then my cousin would, and so on.

It was called being “the redeemer.” That's interesting in light of our use of the word. Ruth, who was virtually helpless, needed a redeemer and Boaz became hers and they were married and lived happily ever after.

Actually that's not the way biblical stories ever end. Usually, there's a little line that seems sort of like a throwaway. Just a little tidbit and often it's the real point of the story.

The story of Ruth ends with a little genealogy that basically says Ruth was King David's great grandmother. How 'bout that. The ultimate insider was from an outsider.

It's a great story and likely it was told in synagogues and around campfires and dinner tables at a time when folks were being tough on the outsiders. Maybe, for instance, as Israel came home from the exile and they were seeing all these folks that had married Persians, they were saying, **“You know... that's a problem...”**

First of all, the Persians wear black hats as their persecutors,
 so it's kind of like the Capulets and the Montagues...
 the Jets and the Sharks...
 the Bears and the Aggies...

That's just gross, intermarriage. It's visceral. It's prejudicial. Old fashioned bigotry.

But as is often the case, it's gotten spiritualized... somehow justified, biblically. **“The reason God punished us and exiled us is because we weren't pure enough. We got all tainted by those Aggies. Maroon mixed up with the Green and Gold. And God, who founded Baylor, sayeth, ‘Let him who lies with an Aggie be cursed’.”**

Seriously... they had a proof-text or two where they could justify oppressing, or at best, ignoring those who weren't pure... Those OUTSIDERS... THEY. And we all know how dangerous they are.

So, someone would stand up at church and read the story of Ruth to these bluebloods. And they have to be reminded of some very important things.

First of all, that from the beginning God had said, **“You are to be a community that takes care of the vulnerable... that makes a place for the widows and orphans and strangers... pilgrims.”** They were to care for them and honor them, not prey upon them.

That's why Jesus in our gospel reading is so tough on the Pharisees who are parading about in their robes, but devouring widows. Probably, somehow spiritually seducing their social security checks, or something. They were easy prey and these leaders were acting on a baser instinct... survival of the fittest. We're stronger, smarter, wealthier... too bad for you.

God's people were supposed to be different... like God Himself who, as the Psalmist wrote, watches over the foreigner and the fatherless and the widow. If God takes care of the vulnerable then God's people ought to.

And that's really what had gotten Israel exiled. It was injustice and oppression, not marrying Aggies, as gross as that is.

And according to Jesus and Matthew 25, it's what gets any community in trouble with God. Really... any **“nation”** is the way it reads. At the end God judges the nations and those who cared for the vulnerable... “the least of these”... the sheep, they're let into God's pastures and the goats who ignored the vulnerable are in real trouble. Exiled...

So... before we go any further. ... Having read Ruth and wanting to be people of “biblical family values” like those in Ruth. We have to ask ourselves whether we as individuals and as a faith community and as a nation are watching over the foreigner... the fatherless... and the widow... Are we behaving like goats or sheep in that regard?

How'd you vote that Tuesday? Did you vote biblical family values? I'm not at all suggesting that it's easy or there's one candidate or party that has the market cornered on that... just that as I went into the booth, if all I had in mind is...

My portfolio...

Or my security...

Or my national interest...

Then... I may be a goat and I need to read Ruth some more and Jesus some more until I get that God commands me, commands us, to take care of those who can't take care of themselves. Those who are outside.

Are you an outsider or an insider? Some of you here today maybe walked in knowing some of what it feels like to be an outsider. **“What's the deal with these people... I thought they were Baptist.”**

Some of you are inside... you know the DaySpring ropes. You know to read the bold print... and not to be bothered when one of the children looks wide-eyed at what you took out of your wallet while she was passing the plate. You're an insider. How do you feel about those outsiders? **“THE'RE HERE! Aren't they?”**

There're all sorts of human instincts that are in play on any Sunday morning.

“Yikes too many visitors... I can't meet them all.”

“O my, I don't know everyone's name.”

“Worse, they don't know me.”

“And who knows about all these outsiders...”

Some of them might be Aggies... or Presbyterians...

Or Fundamentalists... or Charismatics...

Or worse... liberals.”

“Fundamentalists... charismatics... and liberals – Oh my!”

You know your insider-ness is showing when you begin to relate to labels rather than people. ... When we start seeing categories rather than looking for the image of God, we're behaving like insiders who are insecure... and we'd better read Ruth some more.

Because all this is not about us... it's always about the world. **“Blessed to be a blessing”** and if that was true for Israel it is infinitely true for Christ's Church. We should forever be bent over backwards for the outsiders. Making a place for them.

The Benedictines say, **“Welcome all as if they are Christ.”** Jesus is down the row from you... Have you said “hello” yet? We have a sacred calling and opportunity to welcome them, even if they're Aggies.

Even if they're different. And that's part of the point of Ruth... It's not just that we should be compassionate, but that we need them. Salvation often comes from the outside in the Bible. Ruth is David's great grandma. She changed things. We get something we can't get otherwise. It changes you.

What does it do to you to be with someone different... Huh? It's so much easier for me to be with those who are like me...

Think like I do...

Talk like I do...

Behave and believe like I do...

When I have to be with “the other” it means I have to be uncomfortable. And being uncomfortable goes against my instincts. (And do I have to remind you that Christian teaching is that my instincts are often wrong... fallen... sinful.)

We're broken. The self is limited and limiting... The ego must protect itself. It's in the business of firming itself up and making sure it's taken care of. That's the name of its game. And it's usually played unconsciously.

It defines itself by its fences.

I knows its boundaries.

It needs to know a **THEY**.

And if it doesn't know who **THEY** are, it doesn't know what **IT** is. That's the mark of spiritual immaturity. Where I am defined by my group... rather than by my relationship to God... by my relatedness in God.

And if that's the case for us... “I am who my group is...” then we have to read Ruth some more. They are a gift... they change us... change me... My boundaries are no longer me... **READ RUTH** some more.

It turns the whole insider / outsider thing on its head. We're all outsiders. Ruth's everyone's grandma... She's Jesus' grandma, for crying out loud.

And Jesus, who came as an outsider, is constantly reversing the insiders and the outsiders, where those who think they're out are in and vice versa. **“What's Jesus doing going home to have lunch with that tax collector?” “That's backwards; would someone please tell Jesus he's doing it wrong... He is... he's doing it wrong.”**

It seems like the real paradoxical key to knowing your insider-ness, your real and eternal insider-ness is to see and admit to your own outsider-ness. In God's community you come to know you're in by seeing you're out.

"I'm sick and in need of a physician..."

"I'm poor and in need of bread..."

"I'm sinful and in need of saving..."

We feel, we know unconsciously, deep within, our own outsider-ness. And we hate it... We're all Aggies but some of us can't own it because we hate it too much. So, we go through life keeping what's different at arm's length.

"They're wrong... they're right.

"They're sinful... they're the problem.

They... they ... they...

The world is dying because of that word. The Church, our church, is the place where the gospel must be proclaimed and lived and all our "they obsessions" must be gracefully confronted and let go.

I love Ernest Campbell's suggestion that once a year we have a **"come as you were on Saturday Sunday."** *Come with the jam stain on your t-shirt from breakfast. Come with the smell of grass and golf. Come with the party hat or headache from Saturday night. Come as you were... that we can all be reminded that we are accepted as we are.*

I've got to know I'm an outsider who's been welcomed in by grace... I've got to know that... deeper than doctrine... Deep enough to put out a big welcome mat in front of my heart... permanently.

In Christ, God became an outsider so that would happen for you and for me and for the world. And I pray that it will. God, let it be so in us. Am en.

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