

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Receive All as Christ
October 31, 2021
Ruth 1

At lunch time, they line up. From the serving window, winding through the small dining hall, out the swinging front door onto the porch, down the sidewalk across the yard and to the street, they line up for a hot lunch, served on real plates, with real cups, and homemade desserts. Some come for human connection and conversation. Sometimes we just need someone else to recognize and acknowledge our humanity. Others come for a prayer or a conversation with a minister. Sometimes we need someone to help us reconnect with God and ourselves. Everyone it seems comes because they are hungry. Hunger can be a rumbling tummy after a long morning of work. Hunger can also be a need to find something to eat anywhere because there's nothing else. They line up, here in Waco, at the Gospel Café.

Volunteers serve the food. They stand in the small kitchen, and in a tightly choreographed dance of plates and cups and forks and napkins, prepare, plate, serve each person who comes a full, hot plate of food. Over the large serving window is a small sign facing those working in the kitchen is a small sign hanging from the wall. It's a reminder to the servers of their purpose. These people on the other side of the wall: They are not customers. They are not liabilities or drags. The worst of them are not bums. The best of them aren't worthy of more honor. The reminder says, "Receive all as Christ." Receive all as Christ. Christians have been living by this mantra for hundreds of years. The monks of St. Benedict were the first I know of to make it a mission statement for Christian hospitality. Receive all as Christ. In the Rule of Benedict are two long chapters on the specifics of how a guest is to be received. Part of it goes like this:

"All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt 25:35). 2 Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith (Gal 6:10) and to pilgrims. . . . 15 Great care and concern are to be shown in receiving poor people and pilgrims, because in them more particularly Christ is received...."

Somewhere in scripture is a mystical version of the same idea: *Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.* (Heb 13.2) You never know who is on the other side of the window, on the other side of a handshake or an act of kindness. You never know whose on the other side. It may be angels. It may be Christ. It may be you someday.

In the book of Ruth, we see how the tables can turn. One day life turned for a woman named Naomi who never thought she'd be on the other side. Written during the time of Judges, the book of Ruth represents the experience of one coming into a relationship with God and the people of God. This book deals with lack and plenty, and with grief and joy. Hunger and lack initially drives a family away from their home and God's provision brings them back.

Naomi and her husband had a fine life in Bethlehem, known by everyone as the "House of Bread." But then the rain stopped and a drought set in and they lost everything. Things were so bad and they were so hungry, they picked up and moved. They moved across the river to a neighboring nation called Moab. They were hardly the first to move. Long before them Abraham and Sarah migrated to Egypt during a famine. Jacob and his family also moved to Egypt when there was no food. Their descendants in Egypt after many years suffered terrible oppression, so under the guiding hand of God and the staff of Moses they left again. Famine, Violence, Oppression, Persecution. This is why people in scripture moved, and they moved all the time. Mary and Joseph fled in fear for their lives and for the life of their newborn baby. People generally don't want to leave their homes. We generally believe we belong to a place, and we want to stay there. But when things are bad enough, people move. Usually due to famine, violence, oppression, persecution.

America is a land defined by and made by this kind of movement. Some of our ancestors came here because they had dollar signs in their eyes. Some did not choose to come but were forcibly brought here as slaves by other people. Most people came here because they saw no other way in life. Most of us come from someone who came here from great suffering. Many came to escape the hunger they suffered, like Irish who came when the potato famine struck hard. Some from persecution like Jews not just after the holocaust but long before, and like many Brits and Scots who came for religious freedom. Some come to escape the horrors of war: Somalis, Syrians, Ethiopians sought refuge from war and famine. Hondurans, Salvadorians, Guatemalans, some Mexicans—if you've been to these places and seen what they've seen, you begin to think you'd also take a 2000 mile walk for the life of your family if it came to it for you.

This is America, and we all come from somewhere. There's a long argument about whether America should be called a Christian nation. I tend to say "no" for reasons historical about the nation and theological about the church. But when I think about how this nation has received suffering people from every walk of life with a possibility of a new life, I have to say, to the extent that we as a people do this, it looks like a Christian nation. Which also says to the extent that we don't do this, we're just another nation.

I know we advertise that we're the land of opportunity, and in so many ways that's true. But probably even more than that, in our actual history, we are a place of hope for the "Naomis" of the world. Almost everyone who has come here has a story of great suffering, like probably your grandparents, like Naomi. People have always been on the move because of hunger, thirst, fear, violence. They don't know if life will be better where they're going, but they're convinced it can't be worse than where they've been.

That's not to say that it's always easy to have arms wide open for newcomers, no matter our Christian commitments. Christian commitments don't make every decision there is to make about policy—it's more complicated. There's a lot of chatter now about Californians picking up and moving to the Midwest, especially Texas. It wasn't so long ago that people flowed in the other direction. The Dust Bowl of the 1930's was the largest migration in American history. By

1940 2.5 million people had moved out of the Plains states, many to California. It wasn't long before California didn't want any more of them. The Los Angeles police chief sent 125 policemen to the state border to turn away 'undesirables,' many of whom were Texans.

In 1935 Collier's Magazine recounted this not very warm welcome, "Very erect and primly severe, a man addressed the slumped driver of a rolling wreck that screamed from every hinge, bearing, and coupling. 'California's relief roles are overcrowded now. No use to come farther,' he cried. The half-collapsed driver ignored him—merely turned his head to be sure his numerous family was still with him. 'There really is nothing for you here,' the neat trooper-ish young man went on. 'Nothing, really nothing.' And the forlorn man on the moaning car looked at him, dull, emotionless, incredibly weary and said, 'So? you ought to see what they got where I come from.'"

Naomi and Elimelech packed up and moved where they come from to Moab, the Sunshine State of their generation. For a while, things went well for them there in the foreign land. They had sons. Those sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. For a decade they were making a life, but then it all went wrong. This is not going to be a happy immigration story without being a Job-like tragedy. First, Elimelech died. Then the two sons died. What happened? We're not told. Were these a freak set of accidents? Was there a war? Was there a plague that went through?

Whatever happened, this little orphaned family Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth were in big trouble. And then worse went to the worst hard time when drought found them in Moab. The land where they'd found hope, now became a place of despair. Naomi is the female, foreigner version of Job, which actually puts her in a more precarious position than Job was in for all his calamities. As a foreign woman in a man's world, as a Jew in Moab, as a widow without sons, she is utterly vulnerable, and these young women are, too, as long as they stay attached to her. She feels cursed. She says, don't call me Naomi, which means sweetness. Call me Mara, which means bitter.

And Naomi decides, once again, having lost everything again, she must move. She plans to go back home, back to Bethlehem. And Ruth's going with her and will not be turned away at the border of Naomi's heart. There's nothing for you with me, Naomi protests, nothing, really nothing. No family, no husband, no food, no promises, nothing. So? Says Ruth, "Where you go, I will go, your people shall be my people, your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there I will be buried."

It's hard to know how to read this relationship in this precarious moment. Is Ruth a burden who Naomi now has to drag with her as she trudges back to the land where safety is not at all guaranteed at a time when "everyone does what seems right in their own eyes," now figuring out how to feed two bellies. Or is Naomi a burden Ruth is willing to bear out of fidelity to her as mother-in-law, and out of love.

Who is receiving who as Christ here? Is there a hero in this story? Is there a damsel in distress? Or is this a story of 2 desperate people, clinging to one another in grief, about to make their way together into an unknown future. I think that's right. I think that's the story. We leave them today, for this week, as the two women start the walk from Moab to Bethlehem with nothing but broken hearts, Naomi's compassion, and Ruth's courage. May it be enough for them, with God's provision, to see them on their way.

Let us hold in our prayer all the Naomis and all the Ruths in the world, and in turn, be held by them—their compassion, their courage, and their faith in the God of new life. We hold a prayer for those like our ancestors who cross oceans to come here to make a way in life. A prayer for those enslaved who escape their masters and flee to freedom. A prayer for those like the Arkies and Okies whose rattling wrecks point west across deserts and rivers and borders for their children.

May the road rise to meet you, may God hold you in the palm of his hand, and may you be received somewhere by someone as Christ. May you all be received by Christ and as Christ in the pilgrimage of life wherever your journey takes you in the grace and provision of God.

Amen.

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