

Lent 3

March 19, 2017

Ruth 1-4; John 4: 3-30; 39-42

Radical Welcome vs. Empire

We're going to watch another clip from *Star Wars VII: The Force Awakens* (1:56 – 2:01). Don't worry if you're not a fan or you have no idea what's going on. Just know that there is an organized resistance to the evil Galactic Empire. Our heroine, Rey, is doing battle against the son of Han Solo and Princess Leia, who's gone over to the Dark Side. And there's all kinds of mayhem and stuff blowing up. But what I really want you to watch for is the first time Rey, who has lost family and friends in the resistance, meets Princess (now General) Leia Organa, who has lost both her husband and son. *watch clip*

I wonder if you can think of a time when have you felt welcomed in such a way, when it was totally unexpected or at least unknown what the reception might be, when you have experienced an extravagant act of welcome, acceptance, and kindness.

What came to my mind when I asked myself this question was my meeting with the church council of North Park Lutheran Church in Buffalo in October 1993. I had just accepted the call to North Park in September. Now, a month later, my marriage, which had been crumbling almost since the beginning, finally toppled. One of the bishop's assistants was assigned to go with me as I met with the council to see how they would react. This was a former congregation of the Missouri Synod. I would be their first woman pastor, which was risky enough. Would they be able to also accept a divorced pastor? They'd have every right to rescind the call.

The silence after the announcement was palpable, but then they began to speak in turn – some about their own divorces, about their sadness of what I was going through, about their support for my continuing ministry with them. There weren't any hugs – at least not right then – but there were tears. I felt not just welcomed, but radically welcomed.

And that's our theme for today: Radical Welcome, especially as it relates to our overarching theme of "Ways of Resistance for Lent and Easter." You may have noticed that today is supposed to be about "Redemption." But I'd like to suggest that experiencing radical welcome is indeed an experience of redemption - one that then extends out to others in ways of redemption for the world.

The story of the immigrant Ruth being welcomed into a new community, the story of the religious outsider at the well being welcomed by Jesus, the story of Rey being welcomed by General Organa, my story, your stories of unexpected welcome and acceptance are examples of radical welcome. It's not just about being nice. It's a spiritual practice through which we live into the compassionate, just, colorful, boundary-crossing dream of God. This vision includes the voices, presence and power of all people — especially those who have been defined as "other," pushed to the margins, cast out, silenced and closeted — so

they can help to shape our common life and fulfill this reconciling dream. It is a form of resistance against the forces of empire, which seeks to exclude and disempower.

I was at Pacific School of Religion this weekend for their annual Earl Lectures. This year's theme was "Borders and Identity." I don't know how far in advance they planned, but the topic is certainly timely now with #45's desire to hire 5,000 more Border Patrol agents and 10,000 more ICE officers and his threats to target sanctuary cities. All the speakers were excellent. But it was something that Alison Harrington, pastor of Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, AZ (one of the founding congregations of the Sanctuary Movement), said that really stuck with me. She said the most important thing about the movement is stories. And she showed photographs and told stories of people who had been welcomed into sanctuary.

It might seem that our Bible stories and our own stories don't have the power to go up against the forces of empire. But in fact they do. And telling them is not without risk. Pastor Harrington commented that if you become a sanctuary church you can expect to get phone calls and hate mail. Of course that's AZ. But radical welcome isn't just about immigrants. At a church in Portland, OR last month, the pastor's sermon about "loving otherness" was interrupted by a protestor who began shouting homophobic comments.

In the coming days, as we live further into this recent manifestation of empire, we may be called upon to live even more openly and explicitly into the words on our banner: "All Are Welcome." But we know that the call to extravagant welcome isn't new. The Bible tells us so. Our own stories tell us so. Even *Star Wars* tells us so.

When we feel radically welcomed and accepted as beloved people of God, when we feel radically welcomed and accepted by another person or group against all of our hopes or expectations, when we are radically welcoming and accepting of ourselves – we are able to enter into the spiritual practice that allows us to live into that compassionate, just, colorful, boundary-crossing dream of God.

We have been redeemed. And we have joined the age-old resistance against the forces of empire.

Amen

Ruth 1-4

adapted from <http://www.welcomingresources.org/1-HeartsUnbound-Ruth.pdf>

With the pain of Exile fresh in their hearts, the Israelites wrestle with how to share their land and their faith with foreigners. Ezra and Nehemiah call for divorce from all foreign wives, specifically naming Moabite women as among those needing to be expelled. In the middle of this wrestling is the story of Ruth, a Moabite woman, whose intermarriage with

Boaz keeps alive a bloodline that would otherwise have died out — a bloodline that in just two more generations will produce David, the shepherd-king.

NARRATOR: Long ago, during a famine, Naomi, a Hebrew widow, journeyed with her husband from the land of Israel to the land of Moab, only to have him die there, leaving her alone with two sons. The boys grew up and both of them married Moabite women. But soon both of Naomi's sons died as well, and she was left only with two foreign daughters-in-law, in a foreign land. Now, to be a widow in your own land in the ancient world was bad enough; to be a widow in a foreign land, tied only to other widowed women - and foreign women, at that - Naomi was truly out of place.

When Naomi learns that there was food again in Israel, she decides to return to her people. Although her two daughters-in-law initially set out with her, Naomi doesn't wish them to now be out of place in *her* land. She urges them to stay in Moab and expresses her hope that they may find security among their own people.

AUTHOR: Wait! You can't sum it up and leave out the best parts. Think about this: in an almost exclusively patriarchal society I dared to write a short story ... featuring *women*. I dared to think that their feelings and their words might be ... *memorable*. In fact, at least a few scholars wonder whether *I* might have been a woman storyteller myself to craft such lines for women. This is what Ruth said when Naomi encouraged her to go back to Moab:

RUTH: "Please don't ask me to leave you and turn away from your company. I swear: Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I'll die there too and I will be buried there beside you. I swear - may YHWH be my witness and judge - not even death will keep us apart."

AUTHOR: No wonder Naomi relented and welcomed Ruth's company. These words have been echoed as expressions of fierce friendship - even borrowed for use in weddings - for thousands of years. But remember this too, that Ruth, who makes this stunning pledge of loyalty, is a *Moabite*. Her people are *cursed* in the Book of Deuteronomy, which says that no Moabite shall be allowed to join the "assembly of YHWH" not even after ten generations — which is a fancy way of saying "not ever!" And after the Exile both Ezra and Nehemiah insist on breaking up all intermarriages between Hebrew men and Moabite women. Ruth carries some pretty significant ethnic baggage with her, but her loyalty to a Hebrew widow is given an eloquence that makes it a fitting metaphor even for God's loyalty to us. This is what Naomi had to say . . .

NAOMI: I was blessed by Ruth's companionship. I knew she'd be an outsider among my people, but as a widow myself, I'd also be an outsider even in my own land. Who can explain the depth of Ruth's loyalty to me? But who can question such loyalty either? Hers was a gift of grace to me. In a world where widowed women had nothing, we chose to have each other.

NARRATOR: So the two women arrive in Bethlehem, where the relatives of Naomi's husband lived. The townspeople were abuzz at their arrival. Naomi has been gone for more than a decade - and she had left with a husband and two sons. Now here she is: a widow without children, in the company of a foreign woman. Her fortunes have changed, to say the least. They arrive in town just as the barley is being harvested. Ruth, showing compassion for her mother-in-law, offers to go into the fields to glean barley for them to eat. By chance - or by Providence - she gleans in the fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's husband.

NAOMI: Why didn't I go myself? Why didn't I accompany Ruth into the fields? The story doesn't say, perhaps I was simply too old. Or perhaps the sorrows of my years had left me too frail to be much help. In any case, Ruth's gleaning - this care shown to me by a foreigner, my daughter-in-law - is what kept both of us alive.

NARRATOR: When Boaz comes to the field where his workers were reaping, he notices Ruth following behind his workers and asks about her. The servant in charge tells him she's "the Moabite" who came back with Naomi, and adds that Ruth has gleaned in the field tirelessly all day. In response, Boaz tells her that she's welcome to glean in his fields — indeed he urges her to glean *only in his fields* and invites her to share the water he provides for his workers. At the midday break he invites her to sit with the reapers and share their meal. Afterwards, he instructs his servants to allow Ruth to glean even where they have not yet harvested and to toss some extra barley on the ground for her to collect.

RUTH: I was quite overwhelmed by his generosity, and I told him so — while bowing low to the ground in front of him. That's how we showed deep respect and honor to those whose place in life was far above our own. It wasn't just that he took his duty to the poor so seriously, but that he offered it so willingly to *me*, a foreigner. I had expected to be invisible, but he *saw* me.

BOAZ: Word travels quickly in a small town. Although I didn't recognize her in the field, I'd already heard about this foreign woman, Ruth, and her faithful companionship to Naomi, the widow of my kinsman. So I was sincere when I said to her, "May YHWH pay you in full for your loyalty! May you be richly rewarded by the Most High God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to find shelter!" In fact, as soon as I spoke my blessing, I was strangely aware it was *she* who had spread her wings of refuge over Naomi ... and that it was *I*, through the barley in my fields, who was now spreading my wings of refuge around them both.

NARRATOR: Later, Boaz took Ruth as his wife. Naomi was made safe as a member of their household. And in time God blessed Boaz and Ruth with a son.

John 4: 3-30; 39-42

Jesus breaks down the barriers – such as gender, ethnicity, ethics, and religion - that imprison persons and communities. Grace is insidious in its challenge of our prejudice and privilege. Grace overcomes our ethical and religious distinctions of clean and unclean, pure and impure, in and out. The Spirit goes where it will – it can't be contained by religious orthodoxy, ritual, nationality, or ethical qualification. We can't wall the Spirit in or out. It is not our possession or ours to control. God's living waters are for all.

NARRATOR: Jesus and his disciples left Judea and returned to Galilee. The trip took them through Samaria. After a time, they came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat down beside the well for a rest. The disciples ventured off to look for provisions. It was about noon, and before long a Samaritan woman came to the well to draw water. Jesus said to her,

JESUS: Would you please draw some water for me, and give me a drink?

NARRATOR: The woman was surprised, for Jews usually refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans.

WOMAN: I can't believe that you, a Jew, would even speak to me, much less ask me for a drink of water!

JESUS: If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to! Because if you did, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.

WOMAN: Sir, you sit by this deep well, a thirsty man without a bucket in sight. Where would you get this living water? Do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who labored long and hard to dig and maintain this well so that he would have clean water to share with his sons and daughters, his grandchildren, and his livestock? How can you offer better water than he and his family enjoyed?

JESUS: Drink this water, and your thirst is quenched only for a moment. You must return to this well again and again. But the water I offer you is different. I offer water that quenches thirst forever. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within you, giving life throughout eternity. You would never be thirsty again.

WOMAN: Please, give me this water! Then I'll never be thirsty again, and I won't have to keep coming here to get water.

JESUS: Go call your husband, and then come back."

WOMAN: I don't have a husband.

JESUS: "You're right – you don't have a husband. The fact is you've had five, and the one you have now is not your husband. So what you have said is quite true."

WOMAN: Sir, it is obvious to me that you are a prophet. So tell me, why is it that you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place of worship, while we Samaritans claim it is here at Mount Gerizim, where our ancestors worshiped?"

JESUS: "Believe me, the time is coming when you'll worship God neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You people worship what you don't understand; we worship what we do understand – after all, salvation is from the Jewish people. Yet the hour is coming - and is already here - when true worshipers will worship God in Spirit and truth. Indeed, it is just such worshippers whom God seeks. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth."

WOMAN: "I know that Messiah – the Anointed One - is coming and will tell us everything."

JESUS: I am the Messiah!

NARRATOR: The disciples, returning at this point, were shocked to find Jesus speaking with a woman. But no one dared to ask, "What do you want of him?" or, "Why are you talking with her?" The woman went back to the town, leaving her water jar behind. She stopped men and women on the streets and told them about what had happened. And because of her testimony, the village of Sychar was transformed— many Samaritans heard and believed. The result was that, when these Samaritans came to Jesus, they begged him to stay with them awhile. So Jesus stayed there two days, and through his own spoken word many more came to faith. They told the woman,

SAMARITANS: "No longer does our faith depend on your story. We've heard for ourselves, and we know that this really is truly the Savior of the world."