Should I stay or should I go?

Sermon by the Rev. Bernadette Hartsough

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As I thought about the People of God in the Old and New Testament, I thought about the song, “Should I stay or Should I go?” from the band Clash. In today’s reading from the Book of Ruth, that is the question. Should Ruth stay or go? And in today’s gospel reading, should the prodigal son leave his father’s home and after he leaves his father’s house, should he return? Are there greener pastures somewhere else? Will it be worse somewhere else? Can I survive without all of my relatives?

In Ruth’s case, she had family in Naomi. Ruth loved Naomi like a mother and Naomi loved Ruth like a daughter. Still Ruth was leaving her culture and her extended family.

The prodigal son left as so many young people do, to experience life outside of his culture. Sometimes they return and sometimes they do not. The pull for the prodigal son and for many people is the excitement and novelty of living in a new culture. However, once you become accustomed to it and life gets hard, you may question your choice.

The Book of Ruth is the story of a mother and a daughter-in-law who cross borders, lose their husbands, immigrate and emigrate, and ultimately help each other survive even though they are not blood relatives.

Ruth is the daughter-in-law. She is a Moabite woman who leaves her father’s house to marry a recently arrived immigrant to her town. Her betrothed is a Jewish man, the son of Naomi. Although they are of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, Ruth joins the immigrant Jewish man’s household. She moves in with a Moabite sister-in-law, a Jewish brother-in-law, and a Jewish mother-in-law and father-in-law. The six adults live as what we today might call a mixed family: four immigrants and two locals who are bound together by marriage. What’s interesting in this first chapter of Ruth is the openness to others who were very different. The two Jewish men married Moabites. Naomi’s family was in Moab because of famine however it was forbidden in the Book of Deuteronomy for Moabites to become a part of God’s assembly. Apparently they needed wives so they intermarried.

Before the young couples have children, tragedy strikes. The male breadwinners fall ill and die, one after the other. Women could not conduct business and exist in Israel or Moab without a male relative. Ruth’s husband, brother-in-law, and father-in-law are all gone. Left without a head of household, the three women must decide what they will do. Will they stay together in Moab or will they go? Will they split up so the two young women can start new families? Who will care for the mother-in-law, Naomi, an immigrant with no relatives in Moab and no social network to speak of, and who is too old to marry or to bear children?

Each woman makes her own choice. Ruth’s sister-in-law returns to her father’s house, to “her people and her gods” in Moab (Ruth 1:15). She will likely marry again and start a new family. Ruth’s mother-in-law, Naomi, decides to return to her Jewish kin in Judah, where she at least has a social network and financial resources. These two women make similar choices to simply return home to their own people to start over. They will be reabsorbed into their respective families and cultures of birth. Ruth, however, makes a different choice. She opts to migrate—to leave her home in Moab and travel to Judah with Naomi. For this journey, Ruth binds herself to her mother-in-law, saying, “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. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried”. (Ruth 1:16–17) What a decision to make. Ruth came from a different culture yet she knew the right thing to do. Naomi as an older widow was very vulnerable. Ruth’s actions showed her character. Like Rahab last week who connected with Yahweh and God’s people, Ruth modeled integrity and a willingness to stay with God’s people.

The story of Ruth is the story of how the mosaic law of welcoming the stranger was lived out in ancient life. Ruth stood out among the other women. She was a new person in the area. Did she have lighter skin or darker skin or different eyes? Did she speak with an accent? Going to a new place is hard. New people-foreigners-aliens stand out.

What does it look like when we look into the eyes of a stranger, someone from another place? Do we look with curiosity or fear? Do we look with a genuine openness or with a judgmental look?

Ruth is allowed to gather grain from the edges of the field and to “Glean” (pick up) what falls. Leaving the edges of the fields unharvested for the poor to come and harvest is an ancient hospitality tradition. It is meant so that no one starves; the stranger, the widow, or the poor. The other women welcomed Ruth. When foreigners come to a new place, it is the local people that must help. When times are tough others must help the foreigners survive.

Ruth’s story captures the determination of so many migrants across history. They relocate temporarily because of famine or drought or war or lack of jobs and then return home. Some stay in the new land. Ruth leaves her parents, her sister-in-law, and her people behind. Ruth will help Naomi reestablish Naomi’s family line in Judah among the Jews.

The choice of staying and going is not an easy decision for anyone especially for immigrants. Most know that when they come here, they will rarely see their family in their homeland again. Relatives will die and they will not see them. Life will be hard but they can make money and send it home. Their families will have food and shelter but will be missing a son or daughter or granddaughter or grandson. Is it worth it? It depends on the situation. For Ruth it was worth it. For the prodigal son it was too hard. I wonder what we would do if faced with these choices. Would we stay or would we go?