

## Sermon: This Christian Family of Ours

(Rev. Glenn Inglis)

**Bethlehem means “House of Bread”.** But even in Bethlehem, it seems, there were times of drought and famine. So the family of Elimilech and Naomi takes their sons and move to Moab in search of food.

This says a lot about the desperation of the family as the Moabites and Israelites did not like each other at all. It is too long a story to tell in detail, but Lot, Abraham’s nephew, had an incestuous relationship with his daughters and the resulting clan became known as the Moabites. In the Book of Deuteronomy there is a declaration that the Israelites must not allow any Moabite to have a position of authority in Israel for ten generations (Deut. 23.3).

But when a family is hungry . . .

Well, you know the story – after some years in Moab, Naomi, Ruth and Orpah are widows. This leaves Naomi in a very vulnerable situation – a widow with no immediate family in a possibly hostile environment. Hearing there is now bread in Bethlehem, she decides to return with her daughters-in-law.

But something happens on the way – probably Naomi thought, “This isn’t fair. These young women will be persecuted and shunned in Israel. Let them stay with their own families.” So Orpah returned in tears, but Ruth decided to stay with Naomi.

Ruth utters these beautiful words:

**‘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.  
May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!’**

These words are often used as vows at weddings. One can see why, but in this context they are about family loyalty – about bridging language, culture and religion.

Well, Naomi – whose name means Pleasant - is not without wit and guile. She arranges for Ruth to become a Gleaner in the fields of Naomi’s cousin Boaz. The term “Gleaner” is not used much anymore – (though it used to be a brand name for threshing machines many decades ago.)

Under the Mosaic Law, farmers were to leave the fringes of their grain fields, as well as any loose grain, to be gathered by the poor. Ruth became a gleaner. Well, one thing leads to another and before you know it there are wedding bells and Ruth and Boaz marry.

Happy story of course, but there is one more thing: Ruth will become the great-grandmother of King David. A few Moabite genes enter the royal court!

There had always been a struggle within Israel between those who saw the nation as EXCLUSIVE – only for Jews; and those who saw it as more INCLUSIVE – according to Abraham’s blessing, all peoples will be blessed and are welcome within God’s family.

The TORAH – LAW – tends to the exclusive.

The PROPHETS – especially the 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah is surprisingly inclusive.

During the restoration after the Babylonian Captivity, Ezra and Nehemiah dealt with this issue, promoting a renewed drive for purity. But this became increasingly difficult under the wave of foreign control – the Persians, the Greeks and then the Romans.

You can sense this tension in later years between the Pharisees, a reform movement, and the Sadducees, the power elite who promoted collaboration with the foreign powers.

Jesus dealt with this problem as well – was he the Messiah for the House of Israel only? Was he the Christ of all people? Critics charged him for not being pure Jewish as he came from Galilee. That is why Jesus' encounter with the Syro-Phoenecian woman who asked for her daughter's healing is so important to Jesus' own self-understanding.

I have always found this to be a fascinating text. It is full of deep emotionalism. A mother, a Gentile in common parlance, had heard about Jesus, sought him out, and then begged him to heal her daughter afflicted with a demon. To me, Jesus' response seems harsh to even cruel. The food of the kingdom – the salvific blessing – is for Israel, not for the dogs! (Ouch!) The woman fires back, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." (Disciples hold their breath to see if fire comes from heaven.) Jesus replies, "For saying that you may go, the demon has left your daughter."

(Double 'WOW!')

Some commentators prefer to see this as Jesus testing the woman's resolve. I prefer to see it is a tidal wave shift in Jesus own self-understanding of his ministry. If we truly believe the Son of God emptied himself to be our servant, it is not inconceivable that Jesus had to learn and adapt just as we do. Why else would Jesus need to spend so many hours in prayer?

This is Mother's Day and you might properly wonder where I am going with this. Well, so have I over the past several days! Just to fulfil a Presbyterian tradition, I will make 3 points:

1. Israel was never as 'pure' as it wanted to be. As Matthew's Gospel opens he gives the chronology of Israel up to Jesus' birth. Four women are included:

**Tamar** - a bit of a schemer to say the least (Genesis 38)

**Rehab** - Prostitute

**Ruth** - Moabite

And **Bathsheba** – Mother of Solomon through adultery with David.

Israel was the land of the Patriarchs, of Moses, of ethical and racial purity – so how did these women get on the list?

2. We live in the age of Ancestry.ca and those eager enough to use it may find all sorts of curious characters lurking in the shadows. My background is Scottish. A relative in Scotland many years ago traced our family line back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century where he discovered an Englishman – he quit then and there! I am not pure!

Interesting in a way, but what are the implications for our country now welcoming large numbers of immigrants from mainly non-European nations? We can see the anger rising against East Asian people who feel the wrath of those who need someone to blame for COVID-19.

Think of how we have treated Indigenous Peoples over the centuries.

Saul, the most pure of pure Jews, as Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles wrote: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28)

The Church has yet to live up to the full implications of this verse. But we are making strides and now members of the LGBTQ+ communities are, at last, finding their full humanity celebrated.

Peter, in his strange dream before meeting Cornelius, found out that the Church must include all peoples (Acts 10).

The Church is a very big family.

3. And on a day like this can we forget Mary? And we will also remember the blessings we have received from our Mom’s. Moms love(d) us more than we will ever know. They would defend us – sometimes even against a father’s anger. They sacrificed for us. Sometimes they took us to Church when Dad

watched an NFL game. They nursed us when sick and taught us a lot about life without even using a single word. Mom's weep for us – even Mary wondered at one time if Jesus was mentally OK. (My mother shared that emotion.)

You have your own Mom's to remember and give thanks . . . And, like Rachel who wept for her lost children, may we remember the millions of mothers in our world who yearn for peace, healing of their children, and even the crumbs of bread that fall beneath our tables.

I'll close with this wonderful poem.

**Shelling Peas**  
by **Penny Harter**

*for my mother*

We're shelling peas, gently rocking on the swing  
that hangs on chains from the roof of the porch  
at my grandparents' house.

I'm four years old, wedged between Mother and Nana,  
Singing as we swing, I balance a metal pot on my knees  
as peas rattle into it from their nimble hands.

Newly picked from the garden out back, the pods are still  
warm from the sun. I take pleasure in the sudden give  
along each seam, the stream of peas into my waiting palm.

Now and then I eat a handful, sweet-bitter on my tongue,  
savoring their rawness, the scent of earth, the mystery  
of taste revealed as I crunch their hard round bodies.

Feet not touching the floor, eyes even with the latticework  
under the porch railing, I sway and dream in the shifting  
light and shade of a long summer afternoon.

*The owl and the pussycat went to sea / in a beautiful pea-green boat,*  
my mother recites to me at bedtime, her weight on the side of my bed,  
her voice almost chanting this poem she has loved since childhood.

A blessing in my mouth, those pale, hard peas, which I taste  
even now as I chew on this memory, hungry for a pea-green boat  
I might go out to sea in, trawling for light among the watery stars.