

Beginning-Ruth 2: 1-14

October 1, 2017

Well, here we are—at the beginning. It's good to be here, Heather and I have been warmly welcomed already by many of you. We look forward to getting to know many more of you. Beginnings are a time full of possibility and hope. I know Heather and I are excited by how active you are in so many areas and the level of lay leadership at Parkminster. We've heard many comments about how excited you are that we are here. It's right that we should revel in that and ride that energy into our ministry together.

But there is also a certain awkwardness to beginnings—a vulnerable awkwardness where we're trying to decide how much of ourselves to reveal and maybe even feeling a little self-conscious about it all. In trying to come up with a way to describe this vulnerable awkwardness at first I thought of dating. But that doesn't work because we're already committed to each other. I don't know how much you'll like this but I think us being together is more like an arranged marriage. We are committed to each other with only a very basic and surface knowledge of our partners. I am sure we share a lot of the same questions and uncertainties—"Will this work?" "Will our theologies line up?" "Will we like each other?" So while this is a time hope and possibility, let's be honest—beginnings are also a vulnerable time, this is a vulnerable time.

But here's the good news, spiritually, I think we are right where we need to be. There is great spiritual power where vulnerability and hospitality intersect. That's part of what we see in the story of Ruth and Boaz. Ruth is vulnerable: a refugee, a foreigner in a strange land, an unmarried woman in a society where that often meant destitution and death. But that same Israelite society also took hospitality seriously, so she takes advantage of a provision in the codes of the time. In Deuteronomy 24 (19-22) Israel is reminded of the time when they were vulnerable slaves in Egypt. Remember that time they are told, so that when you harvest your grain or other crops leave some for widows, aliens and orphans. Let them onto your land around the margins, to glean what is left.¹

But the hospitality toward the vulnerable Ruth doesn't end there. Boaz, a prominent rich man, our faith story tells us, goes further. He says to Ruth, "listen, don't worry about sticking to the margins of my field, follow my workers wherever they go and take what they leave behind. If you get thirsty drink from the water brought for my workers." Ruth, overwhelmed by this generosity falls to the ground in humility and gratitude. We know that out of this encounter begins a courtship that leads to marriage and eventually two generations later, the birth of David who will become

¹ Anna Grant-Henderson, *Old Testament Lectionary: Ruth 1: 1-18*, <http://otl.unitingchurch.org.au/index.php?page=book-of-ruth>

Israel's greatest king. There is great power at the intersection of vulnerability and hospitality. The power manifested itself not in Ruth and Boaz's grand plans or strategies; they didn't set out to create a lineage that would lead to a King for Israel. Rather through vulnerability and hospitality they set their egos, their agendas aside and created the room, the space for God's creative and healing energies to set the agenda, and bring about an outcome they could not have imagined. But, you know about that. You know about vulnerability and hospitality. You know about welcoming refugees. Heather and I have heard about how you raised \$40,000.00 in a short period of time to sponsor a Syrian refugee family. And how when it became clear that sponsorship wouldn't be an option how you approached the refugee reception house and became connected with the Al Mohamad family, and how you've been involved in assisting them with housing and so much more. Who knows what the Holy One will do with this confluence of vulnerability and hospitality. But let me tell you a story I read recently about an earlier wave of refugees and the unimaginable grace that resulted from the intersection of vulnerability and hospitality.

The person at the center of this story is Judy Trinh. She was 5 or 6 when her family fled Vietnam in 1977 with 315 other desperate people on a boat built for 100. They ran into pirates twice, who took everything they could, including food and water. Off the coast of Malaysia that country's Coast Guard turned them around twice back toward open water. Eventually, under cover of night they got close enough to shore to make swimming a realistic, if frightening, option. That's what they did.

Three months later, Canadian immigration officials visited their refugee camp and accepted Judy Trinh's family into Canada. They ended up in Lethbridge, Alta., and became the adopted family of a local Alliance Church. She says that settlement was one thing but integration was a long, hard process. Trinh says, "It was a goal that couldn't have been reached without reliance on strangers who turned into friends. During our first few years in Canada, I never felt we were lacking anything, except that we rarely had time for fun as a family. My sister and I were latchkey kids. My parents couldn't come to our school events because they were either working or in English classes. They had multiple jobs and split shifts. But their burdens were lightened by a rotating group of church volunteers, from university students to retirees, who would drive my parents to classes and appointments. They acted as references for my parents' first jobs."

She goes on to say, "It was political will that got my family to Canada, but as a former refugee I know that it was community effort that enabled us to thrive." Thrive they did. Judy Trinh is a journalist with CBC Ottawa. That in itself is grace, but you might have predicted that, there's more. I found all this out about Judy Trinh because there was an article on her in the Toronto Star. The angle? Judy Trinh, a former refugee

was herself now part of a group of people sponsoring a Syrian refugee family. She was now driving a newly landed family to appointments.²

Who could have imagined this back in 1979? Did that Alliance Church in Lethbridge, Alberta have this grand strategy that the child of the family they were helping would one day sponsor a refugee family herself? Of course not, confronted with the vulnerable other they simply responded with hospitality. The Trinh family had nothing, so they were open to receive. The church had much, yet they opened themselves to give. In so doing they created the space that allowed grace to take over and have Her way with the world.

So, friends as we begin our ministry together if we're all willing to be hospitable and if we're all willing to embrace our vulnerability then we are on solid spiritual ground. For we are not trying to be perfect in our faith, or successful in our strategies, rather we are simply creating and holding space for the Holy One to work in our midst, to have His way with us. Who knows what will come of that. But I am pretty sure it will be something that humbles us, something we cannot see or even yet imagine.

By the way, you might be interested to know, studies show couples in arranged marriages report more satisfaction with their partners than those in romantic marriages.³ So we've got that going for us. Thanks be to God.

² The preceding story and quotes appeared in an article written by Judy Trinh, "The New Heritage Minute Tells My Story As One Of Vietnam's Boat People", *Toronto Star*, June 18 2017, <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/06/18/refugees-helping-refugees-a-true-canadian-story.html>

³ Paul Bently, "Why an arranged marriage is more likely to develop into lasting love", *Daily Mail*, March 4 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1363176/Why-arranged-marriage-likely-develop-lasting-love.html>