

## LOOKING FOR GOD IN THE WRONG PLACE

Ruth 1: 16-21

Like Muslims and Jews, we Christians believe that God is one. And contrary to fundamentalist versions of our faiths, we also believe that God is not judgement and condemnation, but love. Love is compassion, grace and forgiveness. Love is justice that never becomes revenge. Love is also power. And unlike the kind of power that uses coercion, fear, violence, threat or manipulation to get its way, love is a power that transforms through attraction. Love woos us into believing and hoping that goodness is always possible, even after terrible loss and injustice. Love draws us in with the promise that reconciliation and peace are far better possibilities for healing than getting even. God is the power in such love.

And while we can share such understandings of God with progressive minded Jews and Muslims, as Christians we also have a unique way of experiencing such love. We believe God as love is one. But we also believe God as love is manifest in multiple ways. In particular, we believe God as love is revealed especially in three ways. God is Creator and Abba, God is embodied in the human Jesus, and God is an energy we call Holy Spirit.

But here's the thing, unless we know what we're looking for, we won't see God and we won't find God. What do we look for when we're looking for God? All too often we're looking in the wrong place. Are we looking for God to see whether the bad people get it coming? God as love won't be there, nor does the power of love thrive in destroying enemies and bad people however we define them and call that justice. Are we looking for God to protect us from bad things happening to us or give us special advantage in our prospering? Are we Christians any less vulnerable than anyone else in the world depending on our circumstances? No we're no less vulnerable and if we are less vulnerable it's not because God is standing on guard for us or opening special doors of material or social advantage for us. Once again, that's not how God as love works. Rather, it's all about relationship. How does God above us, beside us and within us empower us to survive and thrive in this world, and rise up after we have fallen? And how does God above us, beside us and within us also inspire us to bless the world through our journey of healing and becoming?

Here's where a biblical story like Ruth, which rarely ever mentions God by name, reveals powerful ways God above, beside and within us is at work in our world. Perhaps as we learn this story and tell it in a certain way, we will discover ways God can also work in us.

OK, let's review the story. It opens with promise but turns to tragedy. There are multiple losses – a husband and father, sons and partners, and the loss of security and income as well. Three widows are left in poverty and grief. What to do? Naomi focusses on practical matters.

She needs security for herself and her daughters-in-law. She's also angry at God. She looks for God in external happenings. God brought a famine upon her people forcing her and her husband to go to a foreign land as refugees to make a go of it. But her husband soon dies leaving her a single mother with two sons. God is at fault here too. The sons grow and decide to make a go of it as new citizens in a foreign land. They marry local women and hope for children. But once again, tragedy strikes as not one but both sons die before they can have any children. There is much sadness and grief. What is God up to? It can't be anything good.

So Naomi takes matters into her own hands. The women should go back to their family homes. They can fare far better by seeking to get re-married with their own kind. Meanwhile, Naomi will go back to her family land in Judah. At least she won't starve there. But here's the surprise. One of the daughters-in-law – Ruth, refuses to leave Naomi. She loves her and is bound to her and will not leave her. Wherever Naomi chooses to go Ruth will go. In life and even in death she promises never to part from her. Wow! Such incredible loyalty and love! It's astonishing and beautiful isn't it?

But is love enough? Is love enough to survive in a tough world? Naomi doesn't think so. She is not only sad, but bitter. She is bitter toward God, she is bitter toward life, and even though Ruth has made such a beautiful commitment of love to her, it makes no difference. Her heart is closed. But what if Naomi is looking for God in the wrong place? What if the love that is flowing so powerfully in Ruth is God at work ready to transform life in all its vulnerability and loss?

And so, let's map out the work of love as God and God as love as the story continues.

1) First, there is Ruth. Ruth embodies the love of God the way Jesus embodied the love of God in his personhood. Ruth is so committed to Naomi even when Naomi is in full-on depression and grief and can't even acknowledge Ruth's love toward her. Once they get to Bethlehem, Naomi stays at home nursing her grief while Ruth goes out to find work. She is treated generously by the locals and especially by the owner of the local farm named Boaz. And what impresses Boaz most is not Ruth's physical beauty, but the beauty of her commitment to care for her mother-in-law and work to support them both even as Ruth is a foreigner, a refugee and on her own. Boaz and all the workers are blown away by the beauty of Ruth's loyalty and love toward Naomi.

2) And this brings us to Boaz. If Ruth represents the love of God embodied in a human being, Boaz represents the love of God as generosity and care. He is not only super generous and compassionate toward Ruth, but he seeks to find ways to support her and Naomi. And more than this, he reflects what he believes is the generosity and kindness of God. He welcomes Ruth to the land of Judah and to the care of their Abba God imaged as an eagle "under whose wings" Ruth has come to find refuge. It's a beautiful image of God isn't it? Embodied

commitment and love which is Ruth, is met by generous welcome, compassion and the doors of possibility reflected in Boaz. When love is coursing through us we not only find a way through our grief through love, but we also find a way to open our hearts to possibilities above us and all around us. We see God everywhere in the kindness of strangers and friends and in what's yet possible even as bad and sad things have happened.

3) And this brings us to Naomi and the work of the Holy Spirit. Wherever hearts are transformed by love, the work of the Holy Spirit is at play. Ruth's being doesn't change. She is driven by a powerful love for Naomi that opens wondrous doors of possibility never imagined. Boaz doesn't change. He reflects the generosity and care of God always there to meet open and loving hearts despite the tragedies and injustices of life. But Naomi changes dramatically. And the change in her happens as she opens her heart slowly yet surely to the powerful beauty of love.

First, it happens when Ruth returns from a day of work with a huge bounty of grain. Who has been so generous to Ruth? Once Naomi finds out it is Boaz, she not only blesses God, but also remembers that Boaz is a relative and next of kin. According to ancient Hebrew law, a next of kin is responsible for their family in need and especially the widows. If Boaz is so generous and God is opening a door, perhaps good things may yet come despite everything else that's happened.

Second, Naomi encourages Ruth to woo Boaz with the promise of marriage. Marriage will secure a future for Ruth at the very least. But what happens? Ruth does indeed woo Boaz and Boaz is indeed smitten with Ruth, but it is not with Ruth's physical beauty, but the beauty of her character and her commitment and loyalty. Boaz promises to do everything he can to secure both Ruth and Naomi, to redeem their estate, and to love Ruth for life. So far so good and more than good. But there's more.

4) Ruth and Boaz are married and they produce an heir. But here's the thing. The story only focusses on the heir because he becomes the grandfather of the famous king David. But the greater focus of this story that becomes clear in the conclusion is how the love flowing through Ruth has transformed Naomi and opened all kinds of unexpected doors of new life for her. Here's what the women of the town tell Naomi as they see her holding her grandson in her arms: Naomi, you are "Blessed by the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin; and may God's name be renowned... This child shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him."

So what are the women saying here? For a woman to bear seven sons, like the seven days of creation, is to be as full and complete in life as any woman can be. And yet, the love in Ruth that has committed and bound itself to Naomi is even more full and complete than that. Seven

sons is full on material security, social status and a sign of blessing from God if you think of God that way. But to be loved is the richest of blessings and the greatest source of abundance. This is where God is most astonishingly to be found.

The love of God embodied in the human Ruth, met by the abundant generosity, creative possibility and Abba care embodied in Boaz, and flowing in and through a lost, despairing, bitter human that is Naomi, resurrecting her to new life. This is God above, beside and within at work. Isn't this marvelous?!

So, what about you and me? Where do we look for God? Is it in material security? Obviously material security is super important, especially when we need it and feel especially vulnerable. Is it in physical health? Obviously health of body and mind are super essential and necessary especially if we are struggling with a difficult condition or prognosis. But we can get so swallowed up by our material and physical needs that we miss an even deeper need and the possibilities all around us if we open the eyes of our hearts to see rightly.

How can we re-focus our vision so that we squeeze out the best life has to offer us no matter where we are or how long we have? How can love heal us as we allow it to flow through us? How do we open our hearts to love wherever it is coming from even as the vessels that carry it to us are imperfect and cracked? God is in the power of love as we open to it and as we pray for it to do its work of healing and transformation in us and for others for whom we pray. And whether we live or we die tomorrow, like Ruth says to Naomi – nothing will separate us from the love that is God that has bound me to you.

It is the God who is love and the love who is God that holds us, carries us and binds us with all those whom we love. Amen.