Meeting Ruth.

My first real awareness of the Book of Ruth took place at a wedding I attended in Sri Lanka. I was a teenager at that time and like most teenagers I loved to read love stories — especially if I could hide the books from my parents or teachers. You can imagine how impressed I was when I heard the words “Wherever you go I will go. Your people will be my people. Your God will be my God” read in church. It was so romantic and beautiful, I thought, a woman pledging her love and loyalty to the man she loved! But I never bothered to read the complete story in the Bible when I got home.

Years later I encountered Ruth again in a very different context. My husband was working on a dissertation based on the theme of faithfulness—hesed—in the Book of Ruth. [Brenner, pp.146-148; Sakenfeld, pp. 24-25]. I was recruited to type his manuscript. It was while I was carrying out this task that I became quite certain that this was a story written by a woman, for women. Each time I mentioned this to my husband he would insist that I back up my ‘feelings’ with facts because he couldn’t present an argument based only on my feelings!

My research into Ruth really started when I began to prepare creative Bible studies for publishing and for use at Conferences and workshops. One of the significant questions I began with was: is Ruth a ‘women’s story’ written by a woman for women? If this was so, why was it included in the Bible, which was written by men? [Brennet, pp14-16].

As I dialogued with the text [Rebera, pp 8-9], raised questions, examined research done by Old Testament scholars and got feedback from women and men attending the Bible studies I conducted, a very different understanding of the Book of Ruth surfaced. It was no longer the romantic love story of my teenage years or a story written by women for women. I began to see it as a wonderful story about

(1) building community through right relations,

(2) about the significant role that identity and difference played in building community,

(3) the importance of naming difference as a bridge to right relations and

(4) how inclusion could become pivotal to a community looking for wholeness and healing.

There are many strands that one can explore in this little book of 4 chapters. However since the theme of this conference is “Walking Together” I would like to focus on 4 sets of people walking together, through the story of Ruth. They are: Naomi and her family; Naomi and Ruth; Ruth and Boaz; Naomi and God.
Why is Ruth included in the Old Testament?

Before I commence exploring the text, perhaps it would be helpful to look briefly at the background of the book and why it got included in the Hebrew Canon. Many scholars agree that the narrative of Ruth originated in a Storytellers Guild. These guilds consisted of professional storytellers. Membership in these guilds was held by “Levites… and also wise women”. [van Dijk-Hemmes, p.138]. It is possible that a widow like Naomi was the initiator and teller of this story. Some traditions point to the possibility of two stories: the Naomi story and the Ruth story, which later moved from its oral telling into a written script that wove the two stories to make one story. [van Dijk-Hemmes, pp134-139].

The story of Ruth has been placed between the Book of Judges and the Books of Samuel in the Hebrew Canon. The period of judges in Israel’s history is believed to be between the 12th and 10th centuries BCE. This was a time of great lawlessness in Israel, when there was no monarchy. Judges or leaders sprang up from among the people to maintain law and order within this dislocated community. The story of Ruth begins with a reference to this period and ends with a reference to the established monarchy of David. A precise dating is therefore very difficult. However, it became a part of a set of five scrolls called the ‘Festival Scrolls’ and was read during harvest festivals in the Jewish calendar. The other four books in the set of scrolls are: Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations and Esther. But its location between Judges and Samuel, Ruth creates a transition from lawlessness to order under a monarchy. The contrasts between Judges and Ruth give us a glimpse of the significance of Ruth, beyond its function as a text for celebrating a harvest festival. [Sakenfeld, p.8].

Judges depicts a community at war with each other, where violence and disobedience to God are clearly visible.
Ruth depicts a peaceful village where there is order, a caring for each other and the evidence of faithfulness between people and God.
Judges ends with a rise in warfare between many tribes, mass murders, and the kidnapping and rape of women.
Ruth ends with the birth of a child made possible through the acceptance of a migrant into the community and the kind and caring actions of different men and women.

It is interesting that no other book in the Old Testament canon refers to the Book of Ruth. The woman Ruth is referred to only once and that is in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. However it is a powerful insight into “the true meaning of human community” based on faithfulness and loyalty. [Sakenfeld, p.11].

Storytelling: A Communication Tool.

Let me now turn to the story in the Book of Ruth. I am not planning to do a detailed exegesis of the text or to detail textual problems in the text. I will use a storytelling format to tell the story of Ruth as well as to raise insights into the main themes in the book. This method of storytelling has its roots in a form of street theatre in my country of birth – Sri Lanka. I have vivid memories of watching performances on raised platforms erected along busy streets. The performances usually took place during a major Buddhist Festival named ‘Vesak’. Unlike pantomimes in western countries where puppets perform and actors respond to cheering from the audience, in Sri Lankan street theatre it is the Narrator who plays the most important role. The Narrator not only tells the story while it is being mimed, but also adds comments and makes suggestions to the actors as they perform. Sometimes the narration will be sung and often the Narrator uses humor to get the story across. This manner of street theatre is also used in other Asian countries with cultural variations. I have known it to be used for education on issues of social justice and in raising consciousness during times of political strife.
My use of it as a communication tool has been developed over a period of years. I have used it in Bible study groups, especially at cross-cultural workshops and conferences. The storytelling is anchored firmly in the text I am using for the study. I then bring insights into the text and contextualize the story so that it has relevance for today. While imagination is a significant element to the success of this method, I make sure that I do not move out of the context of the biblical account. I use the silences in the text as a creative path that helps the text to come alive. [Rebera, Semeia 78, pp. 93-107].

Let’s now go back to the storytelling guilds I referred to at the beginning. Let’s try to visualize a woman like Naomi telling her story.

**Naomi’s Story: The Re-Telling.**

Let me tell you a story this evening. It is the story of a widow named Naomi. Actually it is my story. I am Naomi.

My story will be a familiar one to any of you who have been transplanted into a country that is not your country of birth. It began like this: We were a happy family living in Bethlehem. My husband Elimelech from the tribe of Ephrath, was a good husband and a caring father to our two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. But when famine gripped our land and it became impossible to find food or work, Elimelech decided that we would move to another country where there would be food and work. I remember feeling angry that he hadn’t consulted me when he made this decision. But then husband’s never consulted their wives in my culture. I knew he wanted what was best for all of us and that we would return to our homeland once the famine was over. But when he said that we were going to Moab I couldn’t believe it! How could he forget that Moab was the land of our enemy? They hated us and we hated them. Why, even the teaching of the Law says clearly that “… no Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation…” (Deuteronomy 23:3) [Ozick, p.215]. So why were we trying to seek asylum in a land that would be hostile to us? But, being a woman of my time I packed our most precious possessions and with my two boys, I followed my husband into this foreign land. There is no time for me to share with you how I felt or how difficult it was for us to settle into Moab. Perhaps if there are any of you who have had similar experiences you would know what I mean.

Surprisingly, we did begin to settle down and feel at home after awhile. But then my husband died and I was left to care for my two sons. I know it is hard for a widow in my culture, but being a widow in this new culture was even worse. I began to realize that I was losing my identity, since I could no longer be called the wife of Elimelech. Now I had no name. Most people referred to me as ‘the woman’. [Rebera, p.15]. It wasn’t long before my sons decided to marry two Moabite girls. Ruth and Orpah were good girls and I welcomed them into our home. You may wonder how I could welcome two women from such a different ethnic group, with perhaps differences in attitudes, values and certainly in religious belief, as my daughters in law. I suppose it was because I learnt that being different need not be a threat or a reason for rejecting another. After all I was different when I arrived in Moab, but I still found people who accepted me. I had learnt that difference could enrich a family or community and that respecting difference could lead to establishing right relations within communities.
I wonder if anyone of you have experienced the feeling of being ‘different’? How have you dealt with such feelings? (pause for feedback)

Then tragedy struck again! Mahlon and Chilion both died. And the bigger tragedy was that neither Orpah nor Ruth had produced a son! In my culture a woman derived her identity through her father, her husband or her son. [Rebera, pp. 14-15]. And here we were – three widows and not a male in the family. Now I was referred to as ‘the woman’ who was left without her two sons and her husband. That was my identity. Those were dark days. I grew bitter and angry with YHWH my God. First we were victims of a famine and God did nothing to help us. Then we came here as a family and now I was left with nothing because God did not give me any grandsons. I grieved and grew bitter with each passing day. Soon I knew I had to make a decision about my life, which would affect both Ruth and Orpah. I decided to return to my country of birth – Bethlehem. Where else would I go? At least in Bethlehem people knew me and would welcome me. Perhaps then I would be able to claim a new identity and build a new life for myself.

My next hurdle was to separate from my two daughters-in-law whom I had grown to love. I needed to help them return to their mothers’ house where they could perhaps build new lives too. I knew they would need protection from their community since they would be returning as childless widows of foreign men. [Meyers. Pp 85-114; Rashkov. P. 29]. But my plans didn’t work as well as I thought they would. Both girls refused to leave me and insisted on going back to Bethlehem with me. Finally I set out for Bethlehem with them. As we walked together I tried again to convince them to return to their mothers’ house. I called on my God to bless them and reward them for their kindness, faithfulness and caring for my family. There was nothing more I could give them. So I blessed them both and prayed to my God for their protection. My heart was breaking as I watched them weep. Still they continued to stay by me. But I persisted till Orpah finally gave in. She turned and walked back to Moab, while Ruth continued to cling to me. As I watched Orpah leave I remember praying to myself that God would be kinder to her than he had been to me. [Ozick. pp 202-206].

Now I was left with Ruth: loyal, courageous, beautiful and stubborn! So I tried again to convince her to return to her home. Instead she made a declaration of loyalty to me that left me speechless. It was a commitment made by one woman to another, one widow to another, a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law. She pleaded with me not to reject her. [Sakenfeld. pp 30-31]. Her words repeated themselves in my head as I walked in silence towards Bethlehem, with Ruth at my side. [Fewell & Gunn, pp 74-75]. When she pledged that my people would be her people did she realize how hard it would be for my people to accept a woman from a hostile ethnic community? When she pledged loyalty to my God, did she realize that no Moabite was permitted to enter our temple? When she claimed that she would be buried where I was buried did she believe that she would stay with me till I died? More importantly what would the people of Bethlehem think of me when I returned with a woman from Moab at my side? While her pledge of loyalty was sincere and profound, how could she change her nationality or even convert to Judaism when there were no laws to permit this to happen? [Adele Berlin. p. 257].
My worst fears were realized when we arrived at the gates into Bethlehem. A group of people were gathered there and no one recognized me. Finally a few women asked “Is this Naomi?” [Gittay, pp 178-190]. Because I was still so bitter and angry I replied “Call me no longer Naomi. Call me Mara for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full but the LORD has brought me back empty.” [1:20]. Even as I accused God for my predicament, I wondered if people were rejecting me because Ruth was with me. I realized that no one had spoken to her. No one asked who she was. She was totally ignored almost as though she were invisible. This sometimes happens in host communities, when the receiving community ignores the foreigner or stranger. I wonder what was going through Ruth’s mind at this time. Did she wonder if she had made the right decision to stay with me? Perhaps she wondered if she would ever be able to bridge the gap between rejection and acceptance. Perhaps she felt the same loss of identity that millions of people feel when they make the choice to be transplanted into a new culture. Perhaps she wondered what her new identity would be: would it be ‘Moabite’ or ‘Israelite’ or a hyphenated Moabite-Israelite’? Would she be caught in the middle of two cultures?

From the nods and smiles I can see that some of you do feel as though you are caught in the middle of two cultures. I wonder if it's a positive or negative experience for you?

(pause for feedback).

Life settled down after that. Ruth and I made a home together. Ruth surprised me again by deciding to be the wage earner for us. This was not something women did in my culture. But, now that we were on our own with no male-provider, one of us had to put food on the table. I did wonder if being a migrant woman gave her the kind of identity she needed to be different. There she was a migrant with no skills, no status in our community and yet she decided to take control of our situation. Since no one knew her in her new homeland, perhaps she felt she could get away with breaking new ground. However, I felt I needed to be helpful too. So since I knew people and had a good idea as to who the landowners were, I suggested that she try to get work in the fields that belonged to a man named Boaz. The choice of Boaz had other implications for us. He was a relative of my dead husband and I hoped that maybe he would notice Ruth and realize that she was my daughter-in-law.

Ruth behaved very well once she entered the fields of Boaz. She stayed with the women until Boaz noticed her and made inquiries as to who she was. He was not just looking for her name, but for her identity. The reapers identified her as Ruth the Moabite who had returned with Naomi. Once again Ruth was identified as the outsider, but was also placed within the family of Naomi and Elimelech. I am sure that it was this family connection that led to Boaz being kind to her and making sure that she was protected from the young men working in the field. He had also called her ‘my daughter’ and advised her to stay close to the young women working in the fields. When Ruth had thanked him for his kindness to her, he had said that he honoured her for the care and kindness she had shown to me and for leaving her parents and her land of birth to find protection from the God of Israel. (ch. 2). At the end of the day Ruth was able to bring home a large quantity of sheaves from among the gleanings that were deliberately left for people in need to collect.
When Ruth shared the day’s events with me, I knew I had made the right choice when I sent her to the fields of Boaz. I explained to her then that Boaz was my next of kin – the closest relative I had from my husband’s family. The next step was clear to me. I needed a plan to draw Boaz’s attention to the obligation he had to me as a widow of Elimelech. It was customary for the next of kin to provide security for widows. Despite her identity as a Moabite I had to devise a plan that would lead to Boaz marrying Ruth. This would not be easy, even though Ruth now had two identities: as a Moabite and as my daughter-in-law living within my community. At no time did I feel that Ruth wanted to be assimilated into the dominant culture. I always felt that she was comfortable walking in and out of the two cultures that made her who she was. It was my hope that this security she had found would help me in plans to arrange a marriage between her and Boaz.

I was pleased when Ruth responded positively to my plan. I was not going to try discussing a cross-cultural marriage contract with Boaz. No. My plan was to find away to seduce him! I am sure that some of you may feel that this was not a fair thing for me to do. But don’t most mothers make plans for finding marriage partners for their daughters? Of course we do! It is a habit that is centuries old and I make no apologies for planning to help Ruth seduce Boaz! So Ruth followed my instructions. She put on her best clothes and anointed herself and set off for the threshing floor in Boaz’ field. I had instructed her to wait till he had finished his evening meal and was lying down to sleep. Then she was to uncover his feet and lie down by him.

I found it hard to sleep that night. I felt that the greatest risk would be when Boaz found Ruth lying at his feet. He could reject her for two reasons; one because of her foreign status and the other because I had discovered that there was another man who was a closer relative than Boaz. But Ruth was wise. When he had become aware of the presence of a young woman at his feet, he had asked “Who are you?” to which she had replied, “I am Ruth, your servant… I am your next of kin” (3:9). She named the difference in status between Boaz and her by claiming to be his servant, not his equal. By using the term ‘next of kin’ Ruth then drew attention to my family of which she was now a member. Her claim for protection was not for her alone, but for me as well. Her wisdom and courage in naming difference and using it to bridge the distance between Boaz and her was wonderful. [Fewell & Gunn, pp 102-103].

Boaz did not reject her. He did not use the differences in age, ethnicity or religion to reject Ruth. He did not use the fact that there was another close relative to whom she should appeal as a path to rejecting her. He accepted her for who she was. She spent the night with him and in the morning slipped away before the workers arrived at the field. Boaz also made sure she had more food to bring home to me.

I heard Ruth’s footsteps outside our door even before she knocked. I remember calling out ‘Who are you, my daughter?” Now you may think this to be a strange question. Why would I ask who she was, when I knew it was Ruth? After all I did refer to her as ‘my daughter’ when I asked the question. What I needed to know quickly was whether the plan had worked. Was she going to be a married woman or was she going to continue to be singe? In other words: ‘What is your identity now?’ [Fishman, p.281; Rashkov, pp 39-40].
From then on everything fell into place. Boaz acted quickly to clear the way to his marrying Ruth. He met with the other near-relative in the presence of ten elders. After discussion and negotiation, Boaz was given the right to be our ‘redeemer’. [Bledstein, pp 127-128]. This meant he now had the right to take care of us because he was now the owner of all the property that belonged to my dead husband and my two dead sons. This claim to ownership also included the widows in the family. Through this ownership, the name of the dead relative would be passed on to any sons born into the new family. The elders who were present then blessed Boaz and asked that the LORD bless Ruth so that she may have children who would bring a blessing to the tribe of Ephrath as well.

Finally God was being good to me! We had a protector who would care for us. Soon after they married, God gave Ruth and Boaz a son. What a day of celebration that was! I couldn’t stop smiling. I was so proud of Ruth, who had walked with me from a time of grief and sorrow to a time of security and joy. As we celebrated the birth of my grandson, the women of Bethlehem came together to name the child. They named him Obed, while Ruth and I watched in silence. Then, they walked to me and placed Obed in my arms and declared that a son was born to Naomi! For a minute I thought they had made a mistake. Obed was Ruth’s son, not mine. But they did acknowledge Ruth when they affirmed her for being of more value than seven sons! I wondered how Ruth felt when she heard them addressing her as “Ruth the Moabite”. She was still defined by an identity based on her country of birth, despite two marriages to Israelite men and having given birth to son who would be an Israelite.

Although the sun is beginning to set and I have to move on to the next village before it gets too dark, I feel I need to ask you one last question: when does a person with a migrant identity acquire a national identity within their new homeland?

As I listened to the women, I realized that through all these events, God was also being vindicated. I had come back home blaming God for my predicament. But God had been faithful to me and had provided Ruth to care for me. Now God had provided Boaz to care for us both. The birth of Obed was the visible proof that God was with us and would be with us into the future. God had never intervened openly during my long journey. God had not spoken directly to me, as he had done to many of my ancestors. God had seemed to be silent through all these years that have passed. But now God’s name was finally vindicated. What more could I ask for? This is my story! And I thank you for your patient listening. May God be with you!

Walking Together Today.

The Narrator, Naomi, has told her story and left. We are now left to make our connections with this story. Let’s look briefly at three insights that are significant to our vision for walking together.

Individual Identity

First, being conscious of our individual identity is essential to our vision to walk together. Who we are is more that knowing our names. It is being able to identify and own all that has gone into making each of us who we are today. Defining individual identity is possible when we are able to establish the connections between the culture into which we were born and the culture in which we now live.
For the younger generation who are born in Australia, it is the ability to define their identity, which stems from Australia as their country of birth and to connect it to the heritage of their parents and extended family who were born into a different culture.

Ruth, Boaz and Naomi were able to walk together because they were able to own who they were before they connected with each other, to walk together.

**Collective Identity**

Second, our collective identity is also significant to our vision to work together. The moment we use the words “we” or “us” to refer to our community or ethnic group, we are also indicating that there is a “they” or “them”. Inclusion and exclusion are linked to identity. In a multicultural setting, collective identity can lead to the division of a community when difference and sameness become the criteria that define whom we walk with. There is a danger that our ethnic, racial, national or religious identity could form the basis for separation, rather than for acceptance or being interconnected.

Ruth placed this concept before us when she said “Your people will be my people” and went on to live this difficult, yet powerful claim.

**God’s Identity**

Third, how do we understand God’s identity in our lives? Where does God stand in our claim for an individual or collective identity? Is God at the centre of that identity or at the margin? In the Book of Ruth God is the silent participant. Yet it is God who moves the story from death to life. It is God who is the faithful one working with the women in a very patriarchal and male-centred culture. It is God’s identity that is reflected in a story that celebrates:

- God’s faithfulness to people, which is mirrored in people’s faithfulness to each other;
- Relationships as the foundation to building a caring community;
- Inclusion as a Kingdom value that makes certain that no one is left destitute, no one is left alone and no one is made to feel an outsider.

As we build on the vision of walking together let us not forget the words of loyalty and faithfulness found in the Book of Ruth: “Your people shall be my people and your God my God.” [1:16b].
Works cited & recommended

All Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.


Recommended Reading.


The Women’s Bible Commentary. Westminster/John Knox

The International Commentary on the Old Testament: Ruth. Eerdmans