

## **“Family Ties”**

By Anita Calcagno

Sunday, August 26, 2018

First, let me tell you that I have no training in ministry or preaching. I don't even have the background that some of you have from being raised in a church where bible study was a core value. My early upbringing as a Catholic taught me a lot about rules but not much about the Bible and certainly not anything about the Bible in historical context. The Gospel was delivered in a small, neat package every Sunday with little explanation or background. You were supposed to believe it, as written in the translation we were using (I never knew there were other translations—they were just referred to as different “versions” which we were not supposed to follow. I followed all the rules as well as I could but always felt guilty about something. (That may not be just Catholic, but possibly Italian.) My natural adolescent rebellion culminated in marrying out of the faith to a Lutheran (OH! the horror!)

Actually, in my family the problem was not his religion but the fact that he didn't have a drop of Italian or Latin blood in him—his family was German Lutheran stock—very “WASPy”.

I stopped going to church altogether. The people there were nice and friendly but it just wasn't “me.” I felt like the outsider I was.

It wasn't until many years later, after my second husband, father of Reg who many of you know, passed away, that I came to Michigan and joined First Congregational, where my daughter-in-law, Nicolette, was Pastor. I stayed because for the first time, I felt welcomed and accepted and, wonder of wonders, not guilty! I felt like a plant that had been living in a drought but revived when the rain came.

I felt so good that I tried new things— bell choir, chancel choir, piano lessons and as I grew in music, I also found a new appreciation of the Gospel, in learning what true caring is and what real charity is.

It was through Nicolette's sermons and bible study with Judy Nielsen that I began to see the beauty and symmetry of this ancient book and how it could give me some guidance in this time.

Now, when I volunteered to preach this Sunday and reread the Book of Ruth, I thought that Rich Brown got the juicy part last week, the “Whither thou goest, I will go” part. In a very emotional scene, Ruth has insisted on going with her mother-in-law, Naomi, although Naomi has told both her and her sister-in-law to stay in Moab with their mothers and perhaps find new husbands. Although Naomi is welcomed back by the Hebrews, she certainly sounds depressed. She thinks that God has punished her and says “Don't call me Naomi (which in Hebrew means pleasant) but Marah (which means bitter.)

So I started to think “Why would Ruth feel this attraction to a depressed mother-in-law, a woman of a different religious beliefs?” Remember, Ruth was a Moabite, not an Israelite.

Maybe it was because by being married to the son of an Israelite (who has now died) she appreciated the values of this other culture. Maybe it was luck that in what was probably an arranged marriage, she found a compatible mate and fit well with his family. Sometimes your family isn't the one you were born into— it's the one that surrounds someone you care about or the one whose values feel “right” to you.

Maybe it was as simple as the possibility of escaping the famine in Moab and moving to Bethlehem, where the barley harvest has just started. This is the kind of Bible story that I find

perplexing—and then I remember it's not a psychology text and it's not a history book, not really—it's a book of historical references used to illustrate a point. Of course, sometimes it seems like the children's game of "telephone" where words passed from ear to ear totally change the meaning, or like my most recent experiences of "adventures in hearing" one of the fun signs of aging, where what you say is just not what I hear, which can sometimes be pretty funny.

Ruth's first act is one of faith and hope when she offers to go into the fields to glean in the fields of Boaz, a relative of her father-in-law (Naomi's deceased husband). Gleaning is a custom that came from the early agricultural laws of the Hebrews and breaking it was a punishable offense. The workers who harvested the crops were only to go through once, leaving the missed grain or fruit for the gleaners. Therefore, the generosity of the master of the crop, the owner of the field, determined how much would be left for the gleaners.

Some of you may have gone gleaned apples after the harvest to donate to the food bank. (Anyone?) This practice is still followed, by the way, by generous landlords in the Middle East. If the reapers are careless and drop sheaves or neglect to work behind rocks or near the boundary walls, the landowner might send child workers to harvest them. If the landowner is generous like Boaz, however, he allows the gleaners to get all that extra grain. He clearly did that for Ruth, instructing her to stay and work in his field, where she would be protected, made sure she had enough water, and even asked her to stay and eat with him.

This is clearly going above and beyond what was required by law, but why? Because Boaz saw Ruth's faithfulness to Naomi and her courage in coming to a new land where she had no one but her mother-in-law, because he saw her as part of his extended family, a person worth of his aid and care.

I felt like an outsider when I first came here. I had lived my whole life in the Northeast in only two states, NY and NJ. I was definitely un-churched, feeling like somewhat of a heathen who had broken many rules in my life, but I found my second family here at First Congregational. Your welcome, your acceptance, your example of how Christians behave when they obey the spirit of the law rather than just the letter of the law, made this my place and my time to say "yes" to church again.

You are my people now. I want to do everything I can to see this church, these good people who you all are, continue to serve the generations to come.

We are family. We are all one body. There's a piece of Christian music that I like by Casting Crowns that goes "If we are the body why aren't His arms reaching, why aren't His words teaching, why aren't His feet going, why isn't His love sharing?"

This is what makes First Congregational a very special place, one that needs to be shared with everyone who needs us. Let's pick ourselves up and start off together to harvest the fields and find our worth to this place and time in which we find ourselves.

May it be so.

