MAKING THE BEST OF A BAD SITUATION
The Book of Ruth 1-4

It’s been one of the biggest news stories for the last few months. Refugees mainly from Syria making a perilous journey to a safe haven in Europe. And this, of course, is but one dramatic and overwhelming example of the movement and migration of peoples from many parts of the world. When they are trying to come from a country not deemed too perilous, we call them immigrants. When they come from more dangerous places we call them refugees. But the truth is, people don’t just make an incredible effort at great cost and risk to their lives to come to this part of the world unless they’re pretty desperate for a better life.

And you know, unlike Europe, Canada is a nation full of immigrants and refugees. If we ourselves aren’t first generation Canadians, then we only have to look back a generation or two to locate ancestors who made the journey to Canada. The only genuine people who are as original as any people can be here in Canada are our aboriginal brothers and sisters.

One of the big questions, of course, is how welcome immigrants and refugees are in this country. When my family came we were sponsored like the rest of our larger family by my uncle who came here first. At that time, the Canadian government recognized the need for immigrants from beyond the United Kingdom in order to build up the population and bring in people ready to work hard and make a contribution to this nation. As an immigrant I feel appalled at how our immigration and refugee policy has changed over the years. Unfortunately, 9/11 has only made it worse. Fear of the worst possible scenario and the 1-2 percent of bad apples has poisoned the waters for the other 98 percent who want to come and serve this country and contribute 150%.

Well, in order to appreciate so much of the biblical story we need to appreciate the reality of why so many peoples are on the move in the world. In the bible, like in our world today, people flee hunger and disaster and they flee war and other threats to life. They want something better for themselves and their children. Where you are born should not have to determine the final possibilities of your life. The book of Ruth is a perfect example of this.

Elimelech, Naomi and their two sons: Mahlon and Chilion, are Israelite refugees in the land of Moab. They’ve gone there because of a protracted drought and famine in the land of Israel. They want a better life for themselves and their sons. Moab is like Canada for so many. They not only settle in the land of Moab as foreigners, but the sons grow up and marry local women.

But then, tragedy strikes. It begins with Elimelech. He dies. This is very sad for Naomi and for the family. But with sons who are married there is hope for new life within the family and for Elimelech’s posterity. He will not be forgotten. But then, worse tragedy strikes. Not only one but both sons die. All the men of the household are gone. In an ancient society where the
earning power in the family is all-male, the women are left to the mercy of their communities for support. Not only are Naomi and her daughters-in-law grief-stricken in their human loss, but their economic situation is suddenly desperate as well.

The book of Ruth is a miniature version of the book of Job which we’ll focus on next Sunday. It addresses the reality of tragic loss in a world created by a loving God. How to explain it? Well, one explanation is that ‘everything happens for a reason.’ Reality has to make sense. There has to be a larger purpose in all that happens. This belief can provide some comfort and security, yes. And certainly, some things do happen for a reason which we sometimes only figure out over time.

Naomi, however, isn’t buying this explanation. She is not only sad about her loss; she is bitter about it. What reason can justify the death of those more precious to her than her own life? What purpose can justify the awful things that are done and the awful things that happen? At what point do we open ourselves to feel the tragedy and injustice deep enough to question such a platitude as ‘everything happens for a reason’? The book of Ruth opens a door to a different kind of faith.

But before we delve more deeply into Ruth, let’s tackle another platitude that we hear all too often: “You reap what you sow.” Really? Always? Yes, sometimes and often times that’s true. But how many things are reaped that have nothing to do with what has been sown? How are the death of Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion a reaping of what has been sown? How is the sudden poverty and loss of an economic future for Naomi, Orpah and Ruth a reaping of what has been sown?

Naomi will have none of it! In the opening chapter of Ruth Naomi is very bitter at the hand that’s been dealt to her in life. She is angry with God because given the theology she and every Israelite has been taught, namely, everything that happens, happens for a reason and what you reap, you sow... given this theology, she feels hard done by. God doesn’t love her or care for her. No reason is worth the loss of innocent, precious lives.

Well, once we have drunk deeply of the reality of the situation for Naomi, and once we have taken stock of our own situations and how we perceive our lives and our beliefs about reality, then we can take a deeper plunge into the message of Ruth which is gospel. God is not in the death of Naomi’s husband and sons. God is not behind her economic destitution. It’s not about learning an important life lesson from this or discovering some hard truth out of it all. Some of that may happen in time, but that’s not what it’s about. Things happen. God is not a puppet master who controls things or let’s things happen. God’s power and empowerment is to be found in a very different place and in a very different way. And unless we give up old and damaging beliefs and ideas, we will never discover better and more authentic ones.

So then, what is the gospel in Ruth?
It’s all in the relationships! What relationships are we inspired to build? What relationships are we committed to cultivate? How trustworthy, committed and invested are we in others? Only in such relationships and the building of such relationships is there a future.

The whole story of God in creation and the primal relationships between God and humans is about relationships. We image God as one who is committed and invested in us. God will bind God’s self to us no matter what. God will find a way to make it work with us because God believes in us and God is in love with us. Divorce is a recognition that in order for us to be healthy and whole, we need to move on. This is not the relationship God has with us. In order for us to be healthy and whole, we need communion with God. That’s how we are made according to the scriptures. Cultivating that kind of relationship is the purpose of life according to the scriptures. And that’s the kind of relationship Naomi cultivates with Ruth.

Naomi hears that the economic situation in Israel has become much better. Israel is her original homeland where she has a lot of family and relatives. As a vulnerable widow in a foreign land, Naomi’s chances and prospects are not great. Back in Israel, she has some kind of future. But what about her daughters-in-law? They are still young. They haven’t given birth to children yet. They have a lot to offer. What’s best for them is to stay in Moab, get married and settle into a better life, leaving the past behind.

But what happens? Naomi has a very deep bond with her daughters-in-law. They love her just as much as she loves them. She is willing to sacrifice the support and comfort they offer her so that they have a better future. She’s willing to let them go because she cares for them more than herself. But that love and sacrifice is reciprocated by both Orpah and Ruth. They don’t want to leave Naomi whatever happens. And in the case of Ruth, she refuses to part with Naomi. Even if she has to go to a foreign land with no obvious prospects, she will go with Naomi. She will embrace Naomi’s world, her culture, her God, without forgetting who she is and where she comes from. She is ready to go to a new land and embrace it all the way because Naomi is her family now.

Wow. Isn’t that amazing? Isn’t it amazing to be loved so deeply by someone that everything about us is treasured and embraced? Clearly Naomi has cultivated this kind of relationship with Ruth and Ruth has reciprocated with that kind of loyal and committed love in return. That’s the kind of bond that opens the door to miracles and new life in a world where tragedy, cruelty and loss happens every day.

A big problem, though, is Naomi’s relationship with God. Up to now, her powerful loving heart had been attached to God with the idea that all that happens in the world and in her life is controlled by God. But what happens when God is not in control that way? Is love powerful enough to resurrect life in the midst of the reality of death all around us?

Well, Naomi discovers this in a round about way. And isn’t this how deeper truth comes to us all? We hold beliefs and ideas, and sometimes they shatter in the face of the brutal reality in the world and in our lives. And unless some positive and constructive way through is found, we
give up our ideas altogether. If God’s love can’t protect us from natural disasters, accidents or the cruel injustices others impose on us, is it real?

Yes, it is. In the story of Ruth, God’s love rebuilds and restores life from the brink of ruin, and God’s love resurrects life into something altogether new. And it all hinges on the powerful bond of love in the relationship between Naomi and Ruth. Naomi and Ruth move back to Israel. Naomi guides Ruth and Ruth listens to Naomi and together they are able to build a wonderful life. Ruth marries and has a child, and out of this child eventually, the great king David is born. Naomi experiences rich blessing before God for what her life has become. From the bitterness of her time of huge loss, she becomes full of joy at the newness of life the love in her heart is able to grow.

Naomi’s bitterness did not finally crush the love in her heart for her daughters-in-law. That love was the seed for new life and resurrection. God may have seemed distant and absent to her because she was looking for God in the wrong place – as controller, protector and blesser from the outside. What she discovered, instead, is the powerful inspiration and cultivation of God as love from the inside of her heart and spirit. That’s what saved her and Ruth, and that’s what brought rich blessing into her life again.

And this is also powerfully meaningful when we remember those who gave themselves in service to the world through this country in time of war. God is not found in any justification for war or for our side. God is not found as determining the outcome of war. War is something that creates injustice on all sides no matter what our motives and intentions are as a nation. Killing and destroying is never a good thing no matter the greater purpose. Even when we have to make difficult decisions against a greater evil, it doesn’t mean we don’t have to give an account for the lesser evils we are responsible for.

However, the bond of love, the loyalty and commitment of people to people, the giving of ourselves for the life and well-being of others… that’s where God is to be found if we follow the gospel message in Ruth. And that’s what we honour in those who gave of themselves and sacrificed. We honour the love for a greater peace and the bond of love with brothers and sisters close to home and in the larger human family.

We come to church to worship, to pray, to praise and sing, to meditate deeply and to share ourselves with those around us in community for one greater purpose – to cultivate a relationship with God who alone can inspire us to go deeper in cultivating relationships of love in the world around us. That’s what will save us, that’s what will save our nation and our planet. Sacrifices of love are what heal and redeem and resurrect new life.

Let us pray: Meet us in this time of worship, O God… speak to us… Heal us in the pain and hurt and loss we have tasted in life… Fill us with your love so that we have deeper love to share and build in our relationships in the world.... Amen.