

Room at the Edges

Bonus lesson



Syrian children wait to board a bus in Hungary

Scripture Focus

Matthew 2:13-15; Ruth 2

The Word to Live By

“Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt” (Matt. 2:13).

Session Truth

God calls all believers to find their role and activity amidst refugees in our world.

In October 2015, the world was shocked to see a young Syrian boy washed up on a Turkish shore, a victim of his refugee family’s treacherous journey from the violence in their homeland. In November, the world was shocked again as extremist French European Muslims killed 129 people in Paris and injured over 300 more. As the global refugee crisis in Europe continues to escalate, it births a lot of questions, many fears, and much confusion. Media, both the professional conduits and sites such as Facebook, add to the overabundance of lenses used to view this issue. It becomes difficult to sort through conflicting information to get to the truth. It may be that we are unaware of our own biases-- blinded by our own lenses and unaware of how we have been shaped by culture, politics, economics, and age, to name a few. At some point, we may have lost the ability to hear the human story in the headlines and recognize that it echoes our biblical narrative of the Jesus we love and have committed to serve.

The lesson focus is the Ruth story--revisited through the lens with which it was written. In the process of remembering that story, we may find ourselves face to face with some forgotten details of our own history.

The desired outcome of this lesson would be for individuals to make the connection between today’s headlines and the fact that Jesus himself was a refugee, and to understand that Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer, is a metaphor for Jesus. In putting those elements together, we will find a very direct command regarding our role and

activity amidst refugees. If God calls us to ask ourselves honest questions about our biases, about our perceived understanding of an issue, and even about how fear drives both our perspectives and our actions, are we willing to listen?

Commentary

It can sometimes be surprising for people to make the connection that Jesus himself was a refugee. Looking at Matthew 2:13-15, we find that an angel of the Lord spoke to Joseph in a dream and commanded him to leave in the night for Egypt. In that step of obedience, Jesus and his parents became **political refugees**. The first year or two of Jesus' life were spent in a foreign land because a blood-thirsty ruler was on the throne.

In the story of Ruth, the first verse of chapter 1 tells us that Elimelech moved his wife and two sons from Judah to the country of Moab because there was a



It is easy to lose sight of the children in the debate over migration

famine. Naomi and her family were **economic refugees**. It should also be noted that Naomi decides to return to Bethel for economic reasons. Ruth 1:6 “...the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them.”

One of the largest debates in the current refugee crisis regards economic refugees (often called “migrants”) versus political asylum seekers (usually called “refugees”). It is interesting to note that the biblical narrative addresses both groups, but we will see that the commandment for response makes no division between economics and war.

Geographically speaking, Moab was located in what is Jordan today. During the time stamp of this story, Moabite people were considered enemies of Israel and it was assumed that God himself was against this ethnic group. Moabites were born out of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters and

there are frequent negative references to this ethnicity in the Old Testament. In all of the following verses, Moab is portrayed negatively and with the frequent command, “Whatever you do, do not marry a Moabite woman.” (See Deuteronomy 23:3; Psalms 60:8; Isaiah 25:10; I Kings 11:1-4.)

This understanding of the strong anti-Moabite sentiment should be carried into the reading of the Ruth story. This Jewish chronicle of ancient Middle Eastern literature is full of additional clues that would have captured the attention of its audience. Time may have erased our ability to notice and appreciate them for what they were.

From the Story

Names

Names carry with them symbolic meaning which should influence our understanding of the characters in the story.

The name of Naomi’s husband, Elimelech, means “to me kingship will come.” While this may sound positive, it takes on a rather satirical or ironic flavor when he dies within the first few verses of chapter 1.

Naomi’s sons suffer a similar fate. Kilion means “blotted out” and Mahlon means “perished from the world.”

Numbers

The number 3 is a Jewish symbolic number of wholeness. Naomi begins her journey home as three, with Ruth and Orpah, but soon their numbers dwindle to two.

Gender and Ethnicity

Naomi is left to make her way home to Bethel with one Moabite daughter-in-law. The men have been removed from the story. There are no children

to carry on the family name. They are two widowed women walking home through the Middle Eastern desert—a 7-day journey, an uphill climb with an elevation of 2,000 feet, and a Jordan River crossing ahead of them.

Women were considered absolutely useless, except as a source for producing the next generation. An ancient Jewish prayer, which was prayed daily, give insight into the status of women within the culture: “I thank you God, that I was not born a Gentile, a dog, or a woman.”

Theme

The prevailing theme of the narrative is famine: Naomi left Bethel with her husband and two sons because of a famine of food (Ruth 1:1). She returns to Bethel with a famine of the soul (Ruth 1:20). She has no sons, no grandchildren, and thus, no way of providing for herself or for Ruth. She has no hope for a future.

The author of the Ruth narrative

ensures that this serious condition of the two women is fully understood:

- Naomi enters the Bethel gates and says, “Call me Mara, which means bitterness, for I am no longer Naomi, which means pleasantness, because the hand of God is against me” (Ruth 1:20).

- By the end of chapter 1, God’s hand has gone against every Jewish man in the story.

- By the end of chapter 1, God’s hand is even against the Jewish woman, Naomi.

- The author leaves the narrative with only one hope--a Moabite woman.

It is also interesting to note that the book of Ruth is the only book of the Bible that is named after a Gentile--from an ethnicity that God presumably hates, or at least makes clear that there should be no mixing of blood lines.

Setting

The women return to Naomi’s Jewish home during the fall festival of Shavout, which was the barley harvest. Later on in history, King David will both be born and die during this same festival. During the festival, there was a celebration called “the Mitzvah of Leket,” which meant “the poor will glean.”

Plot

God’s provision for Naomi and Ruth is accomplished through the ingenuity of Naomi, the obedience of Ruth, and the intervention of Boaz, who is their kinsman-redeemer. Ultimately, Boaz is a symbolic character of Jesus, who is our Kinsman-Redeemer.

In chapter 2, Boaz instructs his servants not to harm Ruth, to leave room at the edges of the field for her to glean, and they are to go a step further and pull some of the barley that has already been harvested and prepared and drop it on the ground for her (Ruth 2:15). At this point, those entering the story should be asking, “Who are the servants?” The answer is rather obvious.

Narrative Conclusion

The conclusion of the Ruth narrative accomplishes the following:

- It establishes that hope for the widow, the most vulnerable in society must come ultimately through the kinsman-redeemer. The Kinsman-Redeemer (Jesus) intends to accomplish this through his servants.

- It establishes that the people of Yahweh have an active responsibility for the vulnerable amongst them, even those from an ethnic context that are considered political and/or religious enemies of Israel’s God.

- It establishes that a new kingdom has been born in the midst of a famine that is economic, political, and social. The Davidic kingdom is ushered in by the union of Ruth and Boaz. And the birth of Christ comes through the line of David. The following point should be not only noted but explored and emphasized--not only does Ruth contribute Moabite blood into the royal bloodline, but the mother of Boaz is none other than Rahab, the harlot.

For an ancient Jewish audience, this narrative is politically radical, ethnically scandalous, and socially disturbing. It is also a clear directive about how we

are to treat the foreigner, the migrant, the religiously different, and the enemy amongst us. The Mitzvah of Leket is for every kind of poverty and it is through God's people that the provision for the celebration comes. Indeed, the poor will glean as the servants leave room at the edges of their lives. Not only that, but the servants are told to disrupt the order that they have already established in the harvest, they are to pull some out from the bundles they have already prepared and leave it at the edges. This is not only radical for the ancient hearers, but it also a radical call to obedience in the 21st century.



Message left on a wall in Keleti Train station, Hungary

Thoughts on the Refugee Crisis in Europe

The trickle of Middle Eastern refugees into Europe became a tidal wave when German Prime Minister Angela Merkel issued a statement in August that Germany would make room for Middle Eastern asylum seekers. That invitation was heard

by war-ravaged Syrians, by Afghanis living under the rule of the Taliban, by Iraqis, by Kurdish Christians, by Pakistanis, and by North Africans. Each of these people groups were existing in situations that were socially, politically, religiously, and ethnically volatile. There were many Syrians who were already living in camps in Turkey, having fled as ISIS (ISIL) gained power in their country (since 2008). Contrary to what the North American news media has sometimes reported, the neighboring Arab countries have already absorbed large numbers of refugees prior to Merkel's statement in August.

In August and September 2015, a human tide of refugees, both political and economic, has turned Eastern Europe into a transit zone to Western Europe. Most have an ultimate destination of Germany, but other favored destinations are Sweden and Denmark.

The sheer numbers of people have led to questions about the import of radical Islam, about the differences between politically versus economically motivated immigration, and about the response of Christians and the Church. In the current crisis, the pressure upon the European church to respond has created waves of fear and a variety of reactions. Picking up a political lens, an economic lens, or even a historical-religious lens can bring a variety of issues into focus.



Finding a way in the rain

A Story

The first Middle Eastern refugee that I ever interviewed was at Keleti train station in Budapest, Hungary. I approached two young girls in their twenties, told them my name, and asked them theirs. They were hesitant with their English, but responded. The young man with them offered to translate as I asked them questions about their homeland and their destination country.

“How long have you been traveling from Syria?” I asked.

The young man motioned to the girl beside him, “We were married 28 days ago, so we have been traveling 25 days.”

What happens when we use a Christian lens to view the current refugee crisis?

If the directive from Boaz to his servants encompasses a command from our Kinsman-Redeemer, Jesus, then this becomes a question of obedience. To leave room at the edges, to help rather than harm the foreigner, and to actually disrupt the neat and tidy details of our lives must produce visible mobilization and activity within the context of the current crisis. It also introduces the concept that the coming kingdom is not a neat, tidy, and faultless bloodline of one nation or even one ethnicity. Because of both Ruth and Boaz, the ancestry of Jesus includes Moabite blood and the history of the prostitute, Rahab. From our adoption into the family of Christ, each of us carries the DNA of the refugee, the foreigner, the prostitute. Ultimately, the central stumbling block for most Westerners is founded in the fact that the majority of the refugees are from a Middle Eastern Muslim context. For centuries, there has been an uneasy demarcation between Muslim and Christian lands and that boundary has maintained a tenuous peace. Suddenly, that line is being erased as hundreds of thousands of Muslims flood the "Christian" west and this produces fear. The questions before us: What do we, as believers, do with our fear of the other, the foreigner, even the enemy? And, out of what source do we make decisions about our response to this issue--out of our fear or out of our faith?

"You are newlyweds?" I cried, incredulously. "Then why did you leave Syria?"

He shrugged, "Well, I received a letter saying that I was to report for the military. I have friends fighting for the military and friends fighting on the other side. Honestly, which side should I fight on? There is no good side. And, I don't want to kill anybody and I don't want to be killed."

Whether it is a newlywed or a single, young man, or a twenty-something father, the answers often lead to a desire to live in peace and a feeling that there is no way to attain that in their home country.

One young man received the military letter the day after his birthday. In twelve hours, he made the decision to leave and said goodbye--"I have no desire to kill anyone. I want a life of peace."

Session Presentation

A. *Discovering Our 21st Century Issues in the Biblical Narrative.*

1. Divide the group into two or more. Assign one of the two scripture readings to each group: Matthew 2:13-15 or Ruth 2.
2. Each group should answer the following questions:
 - *How, or in what ways, does the story of the main character(s) mirror the current refugee crisis?*
 - *For what reasons does the text give for the character's departure from their homeland?*

After groups have read, discussed, and wrestled with their text, have them report their findings back to the whole group.

Read Matthew 25:41-43 and ask, *Knowing that Jesus began his life as a refugee, how might that influence his words or the heart of this message?*

B. *Finding Clues.*

1. Give a short presentation on some of the general clues in the story of Ruth (plot, setting, theme, numbers, names, gender/ethnicity). Have small groups work together to find how the clues reveal something deeper in the text.

After they share their findings, ask them to consider, *What instructions does Boaz give to the servants?*

Follow their answers with a reminder that Boaz is a metaphor for Christ, who is our Kinsman-Redeemer. Then ask, *Who are the servants to whom the kinsman-redeemer gives instructions?*

Finally, in light of the refugee crisis, the enemy at the gate, the helpless, the homeless, and the vulnerable amongst us, what is the clear commandment? What does room at the edges, and pulling from the center of your harvest look like in practical terms?

C. *Facing Our Fears.*

1. Make a list of the ways that the current refugee crisis creates fear for the west.
2. Now make a list of the fears that would lead to making a decision to leave your home country as a refugee (they can be economic and political in nature).
3. Finally, make a list of fears that you might have as you travelled to your new destination.
4. Looking at the fears side by side, do they offer any insights?
5. Explore what the Scripture says about fear in the life of a Christian.
6. Spend some time praying for list 2 and 3, which were made with the refugees in mind.

D. Take Away.

1. Both the Matthew and Ruth narratives deal with the issue of refugees in economic and political terms. The Bible is not silent on this issue, but is very clear: the Christian response is always one of mercy. There is no other option.
2. Individuals will wrestle with how much fear plays a part in their decision making when it comes to their response to the current refugee crisis. They should make the connection that fear, while natural, should not have a place in the life of a Christian. In this situation, as with any other, making a decision that is based or motivated out of fear is never wise.
3. Individuals should leave asking themselves,
 - *What are the practical ways that I can leave room at the edges of my life for vulnerable people?*
 - *What does it mean for me to pull something out of the neat, well-ordered, planned safety of my harvest and give it away to the vulnerable?*
4. The recent attacks in Paris have made us even more keenly aware of the threat terrorists pose in our world. With tens of thousands of these refugees pouring out of countries where these terrorist groups reside, many feel we should be very selective of how we offer help to these people—the vast majority of whom are not part of a terrorist organization.
 - *In what ways might recent events affect the way we treat refugees in our world? In our community? In our church?*
 - *Despite recent events, in what ways can we be the hands and feet of Christ in response to the refugee crisis in our world?*

by TEANNA SUNBERG

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Compassionate Churches: Caring for Those in Crisis in Beirut and Beyond

As hundreds of thousands of refugees made their way toward Europe this fall, experts called it the largest refugee crisis since World War II. It's not a crisis simply because Europe didn't have the infrastructure to support a sudden influx of people, though. It's a crisis because hundreds of thousands of people, each with a story of loss, are on a desperate journey to seek safety and an opportunity to live with dignity.

Throughout the crisis, local Nazarene churches have been ministering to refugees in their communities. In the Middle East, this work began more than four years ago when the war in Syria began. More than 4 million people left Syria, mostly landing in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.



*Danil in the safety of his
school in Lebanon*

In Lebanon and Jordan, Nazarene churches have been ministering tirelessly to refugee children and families. These are not wealthy churches, but they have generously given what they have.

Through Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, Danil* received a scholarship to a Nazarene school in Beirut, Lebanon — his only opportunity for education because his parents could not afford it. When extremist militants attacked his hometown, Danil's family--like most Christians in his town--witnessed terrifying persecution firsthand and quickly fled. When he arrived in Lebanon around Christmas, the boy was exhibiting responses that suggested post-traumatic stress disorder. A camera's flash sent him into a trembling fetal position, and he wouldn't talk to anyone for the first few months. By the end of the school year, though, he was opening up. He seemed to be searching for a sense of safety, and

he found that through a Nazarene school willing to open its doors.

Using the link below, see other stories of how Nazarene churches are ministering to families like Danil's.

*Not his real name

**To learn more about the church's compassionate work
with refugee families, visit
ncm.org/refugees.**