

“WHEN LOVE TRUMPS BORDERS”

Frank Alton **

Crossing Borders/Encontrando a Dios
Cruzando Fronteras/Encountering God

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Text: Ruth 1: 1-18, Matthew 22:23-28

To begin, I have a question. How many here are immigrants to Arizona? Did they check your papers when you got here? They didn't check mine.

This morning's *L.A. Times*, which I read in the airport, had a headline: “Arizona Immigration Strategy: Make Life Tough.” I tell all my parishioners to avoid Arizona at all costs when they're crossing the border into the U.S. I tell them, “Go to Texas, New Mexico or California if you can.” Yet here I am, an immigrant from L.A. in Arizona. When I got here, they didn't check my passport or even my drivers' license, yet we just learned that the hotel will require us to be “documented” as part of this conference on “crossing borders” to be able to eat. It's been up and down on this immigration thing for me all day....

I want to speak today a bit about Ruth's story and our story and making connections between them. First, however, let me say that I am pleased that a major Presbyterian body like the Synod of the Southwest is hosting a significant conference on immigration and borders. Where I live, in Los Angeles, Presbyterians have not been in the forefront on immigration issues, and we are noticeable by our absence. It gives me hope that all of you, all of us, are gathered around an issue that is absolutely critical to the soul of our country. And it is much more important to the soul of our country than our current level of political attention would give it.... Except maybe in Arizona.

In recent months, I have had to deal pastorally with four of my parishioners around border crossings. Now I'm not talking about a 1000 member Roman Catholic parish in Tucson. I'm talking about a 250 member Presbyterian church in Los Angeles. Four members dealing with border crossing. That's four out of 250, which strikes me as a significant percentage.

In one case, I went to Tijuana to take some medicine and other items to the husband of one of our members. He had been deported and dropped in Tijuana. His wife doesn't have papers either, so she couldn't go herself, and he needed this medicine. As we stood in the street in Tijuana, literally just a few meters from the border, my friend told me how many people he had met who are in similar circumstances: specifically, being separated from their children by a border.

Ever since I returned to life in California fifteen years ago after living in Mexico City for nine years, I have witnessed the reality of parents who migrate to another land with young children, and they stay longer than they originally thought they might. The children grow up in the new land, so this new culture becomes the culture they know best. When circumstances in the new place reduce the options available

to the parents, returning home becomes either necessary or at least the better of two evils. An extended period of unemployment makes it pointless to stay here. Returning to the homeland is at least no worse an option; at least the family members there will make sure that a person won't starve. Sometimes, for folks in my congregation, it has been the imminent death of a loved one that forces a choice between staying and leaving. One of our church member's mother was dying, and she left – and now she can't come back. Sometimes it is forced deportation, as in the case of my friend in Tijuana.

But common to all of these cases are children, who don't want to return because they don't know their parents' culture. They have no concept of life there; they don't even know their extended family in those countries, *if* they still have family back there. They don't have jobs to go to, and even if they did, those jobs wouldn't pay as much as they had gotten used to here.

This is Anabella's story....

Anabella is the daughter of Yolanda. In July, Anabella and Yolanda will have been living in our church for three years as part of the New Sanctuary movement. Anabella was born in this country; she is a citizen. Yolanda is from Mexico, and she received a deportation notice three years ago. Looking at her options (the New Sanctuary was just beginning at that time), she chose to go into sanctuary. She is under order of deportation, living in our church. ICE (the Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement) knows about it, and they will not come in, but Yolanda and Anabella are essentially living under house arrest in our church. None of us thought it would last this long, but in truth there is no end in sight.

It turns out that this is a very old story. We know it in the story of Ruth, which has many parallels with these stories of contemporary immigrant families.

Ruth was a Moabite, which to an Israelite, carries a stigma similar to that of being a Samaritan ... or for us, that of a Mexican, or a Black person, or a gay person or a disabled person. Israelites considered the Moabites to be child-sacrificing pagans, beyond redemption, not to be mixed with. The opening verses of Ruth's story recount very briefly a set of circumstances that is almost unimaginable ... unless you've known some immigrants.

Naomi and her husband left Israel because of a famine. They heard that there was food in Moab, so they thought they'd try their luck there. Sound familiar?

After some time, Naomi's husband died, leaving her with two sons. They grew up and married Moabite women. After ten years, both of the sons died, leaving their wives widows as well.

By this time, the famine was over in Israel, and there was a recession going on in Moab. Naomi wanted to return home, but she didn't think it was fair to force her Moabite daughters-in-law to leave their homeland, since Naomi couldn't offer them any security in Israel. One of the daughters-in-law – Orpah – decided to stay in Moab. The story puts absolutely no judgment on her decision; she was completely within her cultural rights. But the other daughter-in-law – Ruth – begged Naomi to let her go to Israel with her. The beautiful poetic lines that Ruth spoke to Naomi have been quoted in countless weddings....

“Where you go I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people, your God, my God.” (1:16)

I want you to hear how Ruth's story reveals the superiority of love over law. It awakens longings in me that love still might win out over law, for my parishioners and for the 12 million people like them in this country.

One way to define laws is that they are culturally- and temporally-bound specific expressions of how a community can express love appropriately and effectively. That's a really positive definition of what a law is: A time- and space- and culture-specific way that a society can channel love so that it works for a community.

Often, though not always, laws start out as good; the goal is to bring justice to all sides. The Mosaic law was designed to protect and enhance the life and the love of generations of Hebrews. But over time, things change, and laws need to be reevaluated as to how well they are nurturing life and community and love. If the laws come up short, they need to cede their place to love, so that new expressions of love that are more effective and more appropriate can become laws.

"Once to Every Man and Nation," an old hymn that we no longer sing, at least in my church, because it has sexist language, contains a beautiful line that puts this beautifully: "New occasions teach new duties/ time makes ancient good uncouth." Now before I have to deal with the translators who will ask me how to translate "uncouth," let me confess that I had to look it up in a dictionary to ascertain the precise meaning in English.

Here's what I found: The word uncouth means "uncivil, ungraceful, unmannerly, and strange." It would not be too great a jump to add, "unloving." Thus in this context, when laws and borders no longer serve the common good, toward the end of love, they become "uncouth."

In Ruth, we have a situation in which the original goal, of establishing structures of loving protection for a fragile community of former Hebrew slaves when they first arrived in Palestine, had been lost. Over the years, a law designed for protection had turned into mere cultural prejudice of Israelites against Moabites. It had created a border and laws of exclusion that no longer served the goal of love.

Ruth's love for Naomi began with the same need for self-protection that had led Israel to create the border in the first place. We are told that Ruth "clung" to Naomi. At the beginning, she probably clung because she felt safer wandering to a foreign country with Naomi than being alone as a widow in her own country. But that self-love very quickly became neighbor-love as she expressed profound counter-cultural loyalty that simply ignored outmoded borders and laws that no longer served the goal of protection or love.

This was exactly what Jesus was getting at in response to the lawyer's question about which law is the first of all. Jesus cites the "Sh'ma Israel": "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one....." That text goes on, as we read, to summarize the law as love of God, of neighbor, and of self. Remember: This was not an original thought of Jesus. The Hebrew scriptures taught this summary of the law. And don't miss how radical this view of God is: It was – and continues to be – very unusual for a god to aspire to *love* as the primary mark of relationship. In most cases over the millennia, deities have expected their subjects to give absolute and uncompromising obedience or allegiance, mostly consisting of sacrifices, gifts, and offerings. In a completely opposite way, Israel's God is the one who brings the offering instead of demanding an offering from the worshipper. Now that's a switch. This God takes to the altar the gift of covenant love that brings oneness to the relationship between people and their God.

Then Jesus adds, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” If we can imagine for a moment the law (the ways things are) and the prophets (the world, as it ought to be) as the wall and the door of a house, then what Jesus is saying is that love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self is the hinge that the door hangs on to open and close the door. In Ruth’s story, love opened a door to life in circumstances in which a border and a law had closed that door.

At Immanuel, this has become real for us through the New Sanctuary movement. We are not breaking a law; we are giving radical hospitality to someone whom society is saying has broken a law. And the entity in the government that is responsible for enforcing that law (ICE) has said that they are not going to deport her as long as she is living in a house of worship.

That’s a strategy that not everyone would agree with, but it is a way that we understand that hinge between love and law.

I think both things matter. I think laws matter, but I think law must operate in the interest of and toward the end of accomplishing love.

Whenever I perform a wedding, I begin with a verse from I John: “God is love; those who abide in love, abide in God, and God abides in them” (4:16b). The reason I do that is because at a wedding we are celebrating love between two people. In many circles, at least in mine, it is often true that those two people aren’t very accustomed to being in church, apart from coming to their wedding, and even if they are, many of their guests aren’t that accustomed to being in church, and they have their reasons for not being there. I want to communicate to all of them that having God dwell with us doesn’t depend on what we believe or even whether or not we go to church. Rather God’s dwelling within us is revealed through the way we love. That’s what John is saying.

Ruth’s story reveals the same truth: The root of our ability to love is not obedience to right doctrines. It’s not being part of a particular religion or nationality; it is the reality that God is love and that we are created in the image of God. It is the nature of God’s love that is at the root of our ability to love. Jesus described that love most radically as love for enemies, and he grounded that in God’s love for everyone as revealed in creation: “Love your enemies so that you may be children of your Father and Mother in heaven, who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5:44-45).

God’s love -- and our love -- do not depend on evil becoming good or the unrighteous becoming righteous. Ruth’s taking Naomi’s God was not a “conversion” to the right God; it was an expression of loyalty that circumstances demanded at that time and place in order for love to be successful. It was the love ... and not the doctrine ... that led to Ruth’s inclusion. It was the love and not the culturally-bound expression of the law that led to Ruth’s inclusion. And even before, she had never been excluded from God’s heart though, as a Moabite, she may have been excluded from Israel’s heart. The story of Ruth, like the story of Jonah, reveals that the love of God has nothing to do with being an insider or about believing the right things.

The bumper sticker version of that: “No human being is illegal”

At a minimum, Presbyterians need to proclaim and execute God’s inclusive love. But I believe that we must go further than that. We need to advocate actively for laws that treat people as the reflections of the

image of God that they are. Some call that social justice, and some folks flee from churches that talk about social justice. I don't think we need to try to impose legislation like fundamentalists in many religions are trying to do around the world. However, we do need to work tirelessly to convince both voters and elected officials that loving laws are good laws that work for all people – citizens and immigrants alike.

I hope that in the next few days we will be moved forward as a people – as Presbyterians and as persons from other faith traditions – in that mission. I believe that the soul of our country, the soul of our church, and our own souls depend on this work ... this work of becoming radically hospitable to the stranger in our midst. And may God make it so during these next few days.

Amen.

*** At the time of the Crossing Borders/Cruzando Fronteras event in April 2010, Frank Alton was pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Los Angeles. He has since moved to Prepare the Future CALIFORNIA, a Los Angeles-based interfaith grassroots advocacy organization seeking universal education justice for California children, where he serves as Executive Director.*