

The Notorious RBG, Stated Clerks and Risk-Taking Ruth

A Sermon for the Ordination and Installation of the Reverend Sue Smith
First Presbyterian Church of Rumson, New Jersey
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Ruth 1:16-17 *But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”*

Ruth 2:19a *Her mother-in-law said to her, “Where did you glean today? And where have you worked?”*

“Throwing out preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.” she (Ruth Bader Ginsburg) wrote in her dissent¹ after the Supreme Court gutted a section of the Voting Rights Act in 2013.

About a month ago I was on a plane headed home from a work trip and so I decided to watch the Ruth Bader Ginsburg documentary that had been on my watch list for a while. I was captivated by it. Her story is incredible.

So I’m on the plane, watching the documentary on my iPad and the guy in the seat next to me is leaning over watching too. And I was wondering to myself, “What is going on with him?” I was a little leery of this guy, who was getting a bit too much into my personal space on this flight home from Chicago and when our drinks came I took one of my earbuds out of my left ear and he said, “Oh my God I love her so much!” So I handed him one of my earbuds and we watched the rest together. I still don’t know his name!

But seriously, I was watching this documentary and I started thinking about today and Sue, about you! And I thought to myself, “I need to preach a little bit about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and the Book of Ruth, and Stated Clerks!”

And let me just say before I say anything else....today is a great day for the Church.

The Church with the big “C”.

¹Shelby vs. Holder, United States Supreme Court, 2012:
https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/12pdf/12-96_6k47.pdf

We are so blessed Sue that over your lifetime up until now *and* today *and* into the future you have chosen consistently to offer your good gifts to so many. And you have been consistent about where you have placed your time, talent and treasure - for the building up of the Church, with a particular focus on not just the care of God's Creation, but *our* transformation, as those who both live on this Earth but are also the Earth's biggest danger. Your work most especially with GreenFaith and with Fossil Free PCUSA are a testimony to your lived-out values as a disciple of Jesus Christ. That we must consider frontline communities who are already experiencing the hell of climate change, environmental racism and the sin of profiting off the destruction of the Creation. This denomination, that you have been a part of for a very long time, and into which you will be ordained into as a Minister of Word and Gospel today is good and flawed all at the same time. The work for the simultaneous healing of the world, standing in the way and calling the Church to heel for its sin is hard, holy work. But it is necessary work. And I am glad you are in it with us.

Today is a good day.

So, Ruth....

Biblical Ruth.

The Notorious RBG Ruth.

One who has a clear religious identity. The other does not.

But both, I think, are exemplars of what your God-given gifts are Sue....

Grit

Tenacity

Creativity

Relentlessness

Willing to stake out the unpopular position and live with it

Both, like you, have or had very consistent physical exercise routines that come out of opposite spots on the spectrum of why you exercise. But they are both consistent! Both live in the world of men...and find a way to differentiate, despite the particular challenges this world presents to each of these women.

Only one of them, like you, went to Cornell.

I love the stories of both of these powerful women. One of them we know so much about, the other only sketches, outlines of her life.

The Ruth of the Bible of course, has so much to do with what is going on in our world today - the world we are called to engage with our ministry.

The bottom line reason any of us are engaged in this work is live out the calling of Jesus Christ: which is the ministry of peace, justice, reconciliation, healing and protection of all that God calls Good.

So the Ruth of the Bible, she is a bellwether of what ministry must look like:
Accompaniment of those who no one else will walk with
Letting go and facing a new existence
Resistance to the ways you are expected to go
Truth-Telling
Love

And another strong theme in the Book of Ruth is its stress on a welcoming attitude toward the foreigner. Ruth herself is not an Israelite, she is a Moabite, who marries first Mahlon, son of Naomi, a Jew, and he dies. She stays with Naomi, and then goes on to remarry later, to Boaz, another Jew. And of course in the biblical tradition, two generations later Jesse is born, three generations later David (King David) is born...and that geneology is picked up later in Matthew's Gospel to tie her life to the one of Jesus, through Joseph, his stepfather. But in that geneology are mixed marriages and families, stories like Ruth and later Mary's of displacement and what we would today call the life of a refugee. If God is working out God's saving power for this world through people like Ruth and then later, Mary--what sort of a ministry does that mean we must engage in? Where must we go?

We live in a world where the exceptionally dangerous myth is back on the rise of 'pure-blooded people' being better than the rest; when *our* heritage, that we find in the biblical narrative is one of mixing, where those outside of the boxes of the 'norm' come into the story and end up being the key reason the story of God's saving work takes important twists and turns, weaving their way all the way up to the life of Jesus, who we call Savior.

So, when I think of the Ruth of the Bible, I think I think of the many displaced² persons that are wandering around our world right now. Millions of them. There are about 86 million displaced persons in our world today, around 25 million have had to cross a border from one country to another (a refugee) and half are under the age of 18. The largest jump in numbers of refugees recorded yet was from 2016-2017 and the numbers that will be recorded at the end of this year are expected to then become the largest jump in numbers. It is estimated that two thousand *children* are part of a refugee migration we are hearing a lot about today, the one going on hundreds of miles from the southern border of this country, in Central America.

“Your people will be my people...where you go I will go.”

² United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees Report 2017:
<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2018/6/5b222c494/forced-displacement-record-685-million.html>

Ruth in her words is dissenting against all she is expected to do and to be and saying what her core values are. And in her dissenting, she is saying “yes” to something else, to a deeper and more sacred relationship, to the leading of the Spirit in her life...to so many things....

We are asked, implored, begged by our God to engage the ministry that is present in the world in which we inhabit.

And we inhabit a world where 86 million people are refugees.

As you know Sue, climate change is a huge factor in why people around this world are displaced and become refugees and so I bring up this issue of refugees today because it is deeply connected to your heart’s work in ministry: eco-justice and deeply connected to the story of Ruth.

And the Bible is 100% clear in what our calling is to those who are without a home, we are to take them in.

We are to treat them as a neighbor.

We are to imagine they might be an angel from God sent to greet us.

We are to notice in them the countless stories in the biblical narrative of wandering, seeking, longing for home.

We are to notice in them that the Christ Child himself was a refugee, a border crosser, a child carried in the arms of his parents to a new land for safety - not so much unlike children all over our world.

Our calling is not easy and our calling is urgent because the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures is 100% clear, there is no wiggle room, when it comes to displaced persons and those without a home, and those in need of welcome and inclusion.

100% clear. No wiggle room.

We have Ruth in the Bible and her story cries out to us to remind us of what we are called to be and where we are called to go. And it is not just you or I because we have some fancy title in front of our name, but it is the calling of all of us because we claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and if we claim that, then we better be prepared to live it. And be prepared to *dissent* with everything we have when the society we are part of is out of whack and far away from what God would have us to do and to be. To *dissent* from one thing so that we can live more deeply into God’s calling and God’s vision.

Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in the documentary, notes that she didn’t think she’d be known for her time on the Supreme Court as the “great dissenter” but that is the role history has handed her. I want you to imagine Sue, that this is also the role history has handed us in the life of faith today. *To dissent.*

What I appreciate about the Notorious RBG, is that she doesn't just dissent, say, "no, I do not agree with the majority opinion"....but instead lays out in clear language an alternative vision, drawn and hewn from the depth of the core values she finds in the law and the Constitution - and in who she is.

That Sue, is one of the many roles of the Stated Clerk. But more importantly it is the role of one who follows Jesus. Sometimes you may need to dissent. But do not just dissent and say, "No, I do not like that." Dissent with an alternative vision, because that is what our world craves.

The Book of Order, one part of our Constitution in the Presbyterian Church (USA)...starts with these words:

"The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God's kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord's favor upon all creation.

The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission."³

The haunting question from Naomi to Ruth and to us today:

**"Where did you glean today?"
"Where did you work?"**

Do not forget to labor in good fields and to offer your faithful dissent when it is needed, for it is holy work.

Today is a good day.
Thanks be to God.
Amen.

³ Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Book of Order, Part I:
[http://index.pcusa.org/nxt/gateway.dll?f=templates\\$fn=default.htm](http://index.pcusa.org/nxt/gateway.dll?f=templates$fn=default.htm)