

Geography

Gradye Parsons

*A sermon preached at Anchorage Presbyterian Church, Anchorage, Kentucky
November 2, 2003*

Texts: Ruth 1:1-18, Mark 12:28-34, and Ps. 146

It will help us to appreciate the story of Ruth if we briefly remind ourselves of the story of Judges. God gave Israel the Promised Land, that precious geography that was ever a bone of contention. In addition, God gave the Israelites orders to drive out all of the inhabitants from the Promised Land, but they were not successful. So, year after year there were battles and intrigues.

We have the story of Ehud, who killed Elgon, the fat king of Moab. Ehud used a clever trick. He was a lefty, but he hid his sword on his right thigh. When he was alone with the king, he thrust the sword into the king's belly till the sword disappeared.

There is the story of Deborah, a judge, and Barak, her reluctant warrior. They worked together to defeat the 900 chariots of iron of the Canaanites.

There is Gideon and the Midianites. Gideon, with his sheepskin testing of the Lord, defeated the Midianite army with a much smaller force.

We have the famous Samson with the magic hair. He defeated the Philistines, only to lose out to Delilah.

And then we have intra-tribe battles between the various Israel tribes.

The Book of Judges ends with, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Below these grand stories of battles and miracles are the little stories of the ordinary people. Ordinary people, who have to tend to livestock, grow crops, give birth to babies, and bury the dead, no matter what the battle strategy of the day is. These ordinary people fight their battles against hunger, disease, and life's daily terrors. Their precious geography is their garden, their vineyard, their well, and the hilltop where they tend their sheep. They fight their battles against the pests and droughts that are their enemies.

Right after the first phase of the war in Iraq there was a major effort to get local markets reopened. You would see American and British soldiers at roadblocks into villages. The amazing thing to me was that you would see carts and baskets full of tomatoes. I was impressed how these ordinary farmers were able to harvest a tomato crop despite "shock and awe."

Elimelech and Naomi are two of those ordinary people. Their particular geography has lost its battle to the enemies of farmers. Now, here is a joke that we might miss. The joke is that Bethlehem means Land of Bread or Land of Food. Elimelech and Naomi leaving the Land of Bread for Moab would be like someone leaving Florida for Alaska to look for orange juice.

Moab is not friendly territory. There have been many battles with the Israelites. Deut. 23:3 says, “No Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord unto the tenth generation.”

But hungry desperate people weigh their survival against such things and make the decisions they can make.

Elimelech and Naomi set up housekeeping with their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Elimelech gets work and they get food. The sons grow up and begin to take an interest in girls. The only girls about are Moabites, and eventually the sons are proposing marriages.

You can imagine the uncomfortable scene. Elimelech and Ruth meet their future Moabite in-laws. The greetings are awkward. Eyes are averted or rolled. Wedding customs get negotiated. In the end, they shrug their shoulders and say what all parents say, “They are in love—what can we do?”

At some point, Elimelech dies. Naomi is now dependent on her sons to take care of her and make a place for her. Orpah and Ruth must share their homes with Naomi.

There is more bad news. Mahlon dies and Chilion dies. Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth become a household of widows. The question is, will it be a Moabite house occupied by a Jewish mother-in-law or a Jewish house occupied by Moabite daughters-in-law?

Naomi does the math. She is out-numbered two to one by her Moabite daughters-in-law. If there are any future Moabite husbands, well, there you are. It also happens that she reads in the *Moab Gazette* that crops are looking pretty good in Bethlehem.

She packs up and starts the journey home. She knows that the customs and traditions of her people will allow her to eke out some kind of living.

Orpah and Ruth accompany Naomi to the edge of Moab. For some reason, Naomi fails to notice that they have packed their suitcases also. The realization that they intend to follow her to Bethlehem complicates her plans. First, she will have to explain to people that they are Moabites. Second, she will have to explain that they are daughters-in-law and, therefore, family. Third, she was going to have enough trouble getting by on her own without having to feed them, too.

Naomi explains reality to them. She is not planning to give birth to any more sons and, so, there would not be any more husbands.

Orpah gets it, even without the help of Dr. Phil. She will risk her future in Moab, even with all of its dark possibilities. She turns to home.

But Ruth does not follow Orpah. For reasons good or bad, deep or shallow, she clings to Naomi and says those famous words—but we’ll hold those for a moment.

In Mark 12, we find Jesus in Jerusalem. We have Palm Sunday behind us. Jesus is teaching in the temple and staking out that territory. This is dangerous geography, of course; it is ground zero for what Jesus is about and where the opposition has its power.

A scribe approaches Jesus. He has heard Jesus deft at handling the various questioners. Jesus is asked a question: “Which commandment is the first of all?” (I think we can say that the scribe’s motives appear good.)

“Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Mark 12:29-31a). Another good answer.

The scribe follows Jesus’ answer with commentary: “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mark 12:32-33).

“When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, ‘You are **not far** from the kingdom of God.’ After that no one dared to ask him any question” (Mark 12:34).

Not far. The scribe had to wonder, as perhaps you are, how close is “not far” to the kingdom of heaven.

Is it like the line that parents give their children on the way to beach: “How far is it, Mommy? Not far, dear”?

Is it like the directions you get from the local folk to that special restaurant: “You go down this road and turn at the red barn with the white cow in front of it and it’s not far beyond that”?

Or is it like the people you meet at the beginning of the hiking trail: “How far is it up the mountain? Oh, not far”?

Tracey Kidder is one of my favorite authors. He writes non-fiction in a way that reads like a story. His latest book is *Mountains beyond Mountains*. It is about Dr. Paul Farmer. Paul Farmer grew up living in an old school bus and homemade houseboat. He had a large family of brothers and sisters. He excelled at school and won a scholarship to Duke. From there he went to Harvard Medical School. He also obtained a Ph.D. in anthropology. He is a recognized expert in infectious diseases. He is a tenured professor at Harvard, teaching there four months of the year. He is a leading force in the world’s fight against tuberculosis.

His passion is that he spends the largest part of the year in Zanmi Lasante, a medical complex in central Haiti. There, as one of the world’s leading doctors, he treats patients, one by one.

The book title could be interpreted on two levels.

The first is the continual fight against mountains of red tape, prejudice, indifference, and ignorance that thwart Farmer and his colleagues in the battle against poverty and disease.

Farmer has a geographic term he uses, called the epidemiological line. It is the geographical division of the world between medical practices that prevent illness and where epidemics reign over kingdoms of misery.

His mentor is Rudolf Virchow, a German mathematician. Virchow said, "If disease is an expression of an individual life under unfavorable conditions, then epidemics must be indicative of mass disturbances of mass life." So Paul fights the mass disturbances of mass life.

The second interpretation of the book title is the ordinary practice of Farmer's work. He takes Kidder, twelve years his senior, with him when he goes on daylong hikes to visit patients, one by one, in the Haitian highlands. On dirt roads, over one ridge after another, Farmer stalks and Kidder struggles to keep up, all to visit one patient in one hut.

You would think that Farmer was some modern day hero or saint in the making. Maybe he is, but like most heroes and saints, he is not comfortable with that label. Kidder keeps probing the depths of Farmer's empathy for the poor until he finally get this reply: "Look, all the great religious traditions in the world say, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.' My answer is, sorry, I can't, but I am gonna keep on trying."

I think we need to readjust our mindsets from the image of the Promised Land to the reality of the Promised Road.

Ruth's famous promise was made in the middle of the road between the life and geography she knew and the relationship she had with Naomi. Her promise was to go to a place she had never seen. "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" (Ruth 1:16-17a).

The scribe was blessed because Jesus saw that he, too, was on a journey between the faith he knew and the promise he saw in Jesus.

You and I have another geography that shapes us. It is the geography of our own souls. In that geography we have large mountains of our own distrust, pride, prejudice, and plain ole human selfishness that we have to conquer to make any progress at all. We also have those particular trails we need to hike to love that neighbor, that family member, or that fellow pew sitter.

The Promised Land is down the Promised Road. It is not far. We can make progress on that journey if we will climb mountain after mountain of learning to love God with all of our hearts and in the ordinary struggle of learning to love our neighbors as ourselves.