

WINGS OF THE DOVE  
ON THE FENCE

Texts on Sunday, July 8, 2012

*Ruth 1: 1-18; Matthew 20: 1-16*

**I**MMIGRATION IN AMERICA is a mess. Its awful odors are hard to miss, but let me indicate one. About a year ago, Alabama's governor signed into law HB 56. It aims to make life as near to impossible as possible for undocumented workers. Police are to stop and demand documents from anyone they suspect of being not-American; teachers must identify children whose parents have no documents; bail is automatically denied to those without papers; and anyone who offers support or shelter to undocumented workers is subject to criminal penalties. Suddenly, church volunteers face the threat of jail for taking the Lord's blessing to heart: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me . . . As you did to one of the least of these, you did the same to me." Alabama aims to jail Jesus all over again.

Under the leadership of their conference minister, noted theologian William Willimon, the Methodist clergy of Alabama wrote a letter to their governor, protesting the law. On the web where that letter is publicized, Alabama church members wrote back to their ministers. Most offered support, but this response from one man is not untypical: "Are you kidding me? . . . Clergy shouldn't be taking a stand on ANY political issue . . . The pulpit is not an appropriate forum to push political ideals."

There's the mess—the right wing reaching around to slice off the left wing of the dove. Why, if the pulpits of this bedeviled nation must fall still more silent; if the Godward reflecting mind of the religious must never consider whether public policies offend against Thy will, as it is being undone on earth, then the religion and rituals of such a people rise like a malodorous offense to God, deserving of Isaiah's bitter speech,

Hear the word of the Lord! What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? Trample my courts no more . . . Incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure [your] solemn assemblies. Your festivals . . . have become a burden to me. When you stretch out your hands . . . though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean . . . cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1: 10-17)

But let us ask, Why is immigration policy so stuck and so hot? We need to begin with an understanding of what is right in the right wing's values.

In the sermon last week, we reflected on the ends or purposes of a nation. One idea was simple. We said that, at base, "a nation exists [as] a place in which to live safely." More generally, we observed that sound conservative principles "give attention to existing structures and to all that has helped the nation come down to this generation." I am reminded of the unreflective farmer in Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall." "Good fences make good neighbors," says he,

as he lifts back onto the wall the stones that set his property off from the other's. The core value is plain. Guard what is good. That's conservative.

Our bodies could not function apart from this conservative principle. The membrane of each cell stands like a good fence, identifying the cell's purpose with its structure. The organs of the body also have definite limits—fences, if you will—and with that, the ability to detect and reject alien elements. What we too simply call “the immune system,” as if it were the body's fire department, waiting in there somewhere to respond to crisis, is in reality a complex intelligence distributed throughout the body in myriad ways to aid the whole organism to maintain its identity.

A nation, indeed any organization, functions according to these very principles of identity. The similarity is not incidental, but essential. Every living structure, whether organic or social, thrives or declines according to the clarity of its purpose, its identity. Partly through its membrane—its wall, its border—that life is able to reject what is harmful and admit what is helpful.

But just here comes the mystery of the membrane, of what makes a good fence for life. For if a wall is too strong, nothing can enter, and life itself slips out. So too dies the church whose practices are so rigid that new ideas and new people cannot enter. So too the nation. The fact is that every living organism must admit substances utterly different from itself—food—in order to maintain itself. Where life is concerned, a good fence is a paradox, for without holes, it is no good. In Frost's poem, as the narrator works the wall with his confidently conservative neighbor, his thought takes wing on a liberal updraft. “Before I built a wall,” he muses, “I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out / And to whom I was like to give offence. / Something there is that doesn't love a wall / That wants it down.”

The story of Ruth tells of that something that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down. It begins as a migrant workers' story. The whole family of Ruth's future in-laws are migrating out of Judah, heading east. Why? Famine. You see, the promised land is no sure thing, but neither is leaving it. Ten years after they emigrate, all the men of the family have died in their adopted nation and Naomi is about to migrate back to Judah. Why? For economic security. Ruth, the widowed daughter-in-law, goes with Naomi. She leaves her own country, now to become a foreign worker in the fields of Boaz in Bethlehem. She will be what the Bible calls a sojourner, a person with no legal standing—an out-law in the oldest sense of that word, one outside the protection of the law, vulnerable to every kind of abuse and violence. Ruth is an undocumented worker.

If we zoom out the lens from this Bible story to see all the Bible stories together, spread over two thousand years, what shows up—from a distance? Lots of movement. Lots of migration. See Abram and Sarai on a thousand mile trek from Ur of the Chaldees. Historians point to records of great migrations going

north from today's Iraq during with the times when this family might have been on the move. Why abandon one land for new lands? Come now! For food, for safety. No sooner do the couple arrive in Canaan but famine in the promised land drives them on to Egypt. All of Jacob's sons are driven south to Egypt by famine. Hundreds of years later, were the "Hebrews" caught up in the ageless movements historians see, seeking after security? Is this how God calls? Let's cut the history lesson short and summarize: Immigrants everywhere, subject to power struggles, war, scarcity, fear. Why were they on the move? It is perfectly plain: They moved to survive. That's all. That is what moved them then; it moves people to move now. For the very same reasons that humans set borders and field fighters to guard what they they've got, the world's least and lost often ignore those borders in search of safety and survival.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down. Now, the fact that poverty and survival need drive migrations across borders does not prove that borders are wrong or obsolete; or that border patrols should be lifted from this and all nations; or that everyone who wants to cross a border should be allowed in. Attention to the body of the nation, to what belongs in and what does not, is essential to its health. These membranes matter to the function of the whole. Dreams of borderless access to prosperity for all naïvely dismiss the mystery and complexity of a nation's structure and function.

The story of Ruth has yet more to offer here. Ruth, as you may know, is taken in marriage by Boaz, an older man in whose field she was gleaning grains of wheat fallen from the stalks at harvest. This foreign woman from a tribe to the east which was detested by Israel soon gives birth to a child who will be father to the father of King David, according to the legend. In this way, the story affirms that the greatest hope for the future of the nation, symbolized by David, would not have come into being except for the ardor of a *foreign* woman for her new found people coupled with the good will of a good man to love the foreigner, though she was also a widow, and together to start over. *Ruth* is a manifesto for the undocumented worker. And there's a little more here.

The return from exile to Jerusalem did not take place smoothly, for the descendants of the original exiles did not get along with the workers who had been living continuously in the city for several generations. Ultimately, the exile elite exerted the power of class over the workers. The book of *Ezra* tells a heart-breaking story from the times that follow, as the elite in Jerusalem build walls of ethnic purity, firm and impenetrable. One afternoon, they tell all Jewish men that that very day, they must go home and divorce their foreign wives and expel them from their houses. On hearing the edict, the men weep. (*Ezra* 9-10) The book of *Ruth*, Bible historians show, was written during this same era, to try to calm the fear and hatred of foreigners and of mixed marriage, because such fears distorted the great end of the nation, namely, to become a light to all nations. In America today, we need a new story of Ruth.

Its outline is simple. Its silhouette can be seen more clearly by people of faith than by people of fear. Hence, your work in faith and politics is cut out for you. It has two lines, one for those who are already here and one for those suffering beyond our borders who must do something to survive. For the 12 million undocumented workers who already live here, let's face it: They did not leak in here like water through a bad roof. They have not damaged the wall or ruined the floors. Rather, we pulled them here. We drew them to our children, to our lawns, to our restaurants and our toughest, dirtiest factories. They came to work for us. Breaking the law was no part of their motive; but only to survive by serving. Therefore we are responsible for them, according to the Law. "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien," says the Lord, "for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:21) Those who are here are already part of our body. To aim to hurt them, as so many wish to do, is like aiming a gun at our foot. To wield the blade of man's law to cut them off is to swing an axe at our own left hand.

As to the second line in the arc of justice, notice this. Throughout our sermon series, when we probe questions of justice, we will first ask where our lens is focused *from*: On what offenses and what possibility? What might we see if we looked from a higher plane, seeing more. From a distance, will we see that sometimes "them and us" is just us? Is it safe to see thus? Is it good for the body?

From a distance, it makes no sense to blame the poverty and violence in neighbor nations—the horrifying gun play in the Mexican drug wars, for example, the awful unemployment—on those nations alone, as if we had no part in causing their suffering. As to guns and drugs in Mexico, to the contrary, American practices are nearly the whole cause. As to economic under-development, the question is far more complex, of course, and a subject hardly proper to a sermon. Still, let it be never more plain that the energies we spend on keeping the poor out of our body will never bring a solution to the sorrows. They are rather appeals to the most anxious, fearful elements in our body; to those of us most afraid of change and of the costs of a lasting peace.

The only worthy dream for an end to the sorrows of illegal immigration is one in which neither we nor our leaders remain stuck on the fence, but finally drop down on the other side to work on prosperity not for ourselves alone, but for all the neighbor nations at once. When we are free enough to remember what the kingdom of heaven is like; free enough to give as freely as we have received and to say to the wealthy in our midst, in the Spirit of our Lord, "Are we not allowed to do as we choose with what belongs to us? Are you jealous because we are generous?"; when we understand why our Lord has taught us again and again that the first will be last, and the last will be first, then that something that doesn't love a wall will come down in love for all.