

“Because We’re Family”

Ruth 1 (Select Verses)

Matthew 12:46-50

If we tried to summarize the history of Western Christianity by simply naming cities, we might say: first Jerusalem, then Rome, then Wittenberg and Geneva. We’re often taught that even though our faith started in the Middle East, it rather quickly centered in Europe and then missionaries went out from there. But, it turns out that Martin Luther was very interested in – even inspired – by the Ethiopian Church and he wasn’t the only one.

It was a pretty widespread belief in the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Ethiopia was the first nation to convert to Christianity. Think about the story from Acts about the Ethiopian eunuch who serves the Queen of Ethiopia. He’s moved by the Gospel and baptized by Philip. There are also church legends that the Apostles Bartholomew and Matthew travelled to Ethiopia to share the Gospel. Then there are the stories of a mythic, ideal Christian kingdom far from the rest of the church.

Martin Luther believed that his reforms meant a return to the historic church, the biblical church, the church of the Apostles, but how could he prove it? When he thought about the church in Ethiopia, he saw a church that was unconnected from popes, a church that developed without the influence of the Catholic church. It held great promise for him.

In 1534, Martin Luther regularly had dialogues and debates with other reformers and Catholic theologians. That year, to his surprise, a man sought him out. This was Abba Mika’el, a deacon from the Ethiopian church. Michael the Deacon didn’t speak Greek or Latin, but he did speak a little Italian. Excited, Luther invited an interpreter to join them. Luther, Michael the Deacon, and several other reformers continued to meet a number of times over a period of five weeks. By the end of this time, Michael and Luther agreed that they shared beliefs on the most important questions of Christian teaching and theology. They saw eye to eye about the Trinity,

about scripture being translated into the language that regular folks spoke, and about clergy having the right to get married. They both believed that all present should receive both bread and wine at communion. In the end, they said that even though they had differences in their liturgies and ceremonies, they were not major enough to “undermine the unity of the Church [or] conflict with faith.” They both believed so deeply in the one Church of Jesus Christ that they declared themselves to be in full communion. Luther wrote Michael the Deacon a letter of recommendation so he would be welcomed by reformers as he traveled on.

Meeting and speaking with Michael the Deacon had a great impact on Luther. He mentioned it in letters and in sermons, which were then copied and published to a wider audience. Here was confirmation that Protestants weren’t destroying the unity of the church – they were restoring the church. One copy of one of these letters even describes Michael as a bishop rather than a deacon to lend his voice more weight.

But, over the years, Protestants were less enthusiastic about this connection with Ethiopians. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, new translations downplayed the encounter and referred to the foreigner as part of the “Greek Church.” By the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was a greater emphasis on reflecting the uniqueness of the Protestant movement arising within Germany. It is only recently that the writings have been retranslated and re-published.

We choose which stories we tell and how we tell them. Learning about Martin Luther and Abba Mika’el reminds us that Christianity has never spread from one culture, one theology, one human power outwards. God’s good news is global, shared by people all over the world. Why should we think of our faith as a lone beacon of Christ when his light shines from every continent?

In our Old Testament lesson, Ruth is a great hero to us. Her kindness, faithfulness, and courage are profound and surprising. Staying with Naomi meant volunteering for poverty, hardship, and whispers from the community. It meant sacrificing her own security so that Naomi would not have to suffer alone. All of this is reflected in the scripture. But one detail we often skip past is that Naomi and her husband were refugees in Moab. A famine had made it impossible to live in Judah so they had had to move to survive. Against common practice, Naomi's sons married Moabite women. What else could they do? They lived there for ten years.

By the time Naomi plans to move back home, she will probably have to reckon with the fact that she spent so many years in the land of Israel's enemies. During the wilderness wanderings, Moab had refused to allow the Hebrew people to pass through their land, forcing them to take a longer, more roundabout route. A Moabite king called Balak tried in vain to curse the Hebrew people. Moabites are also said to have tempted the Israelites to worship idols. It was so grievous that the law (Deuteronomy 23:3-4) prohibits a Moabite from coming into the assembly of the Lord – forever. There were battles and casualties over the years.

This is not just a story about the suffering of one family. It is the story of the Hebrew people encountering a world that is sometimes hostile and trying to make a way in it. It's about nations grappling with the troubling reality that their enemies may also teach them about kindness, faithfulness, and courage. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is the God of all creation. Ruth being a Moabite isn't an accident or a coincidence. It's a challenge to consider our faith on a global scale.

In the Gospel, we find Jesus's family trying to hold on to him. They want to understand him. Maybe they just want him to come home. The thing is – Jesus is at home everywhere: including places where we don't feel at home at all. Who is Jesus's family? Jesus says, "Anyone

who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother or sister or mother.” Jesus’s words are so deceptively simple. If we were to try to scope out the boundaries of who’s in and who’s out, how would we even do that? Some things are easily recognizable as against God’s will, but not everything. Sometimes we’re doing a pretty decent job of following God’s will, but not all the time. Countless seeds of division, claims to power, acts of violence, wars, and more have been carried out by Christians who were sure they know who Jesus’s mother and brother and sisters really were. Are we sure, too? Are we living into the cosmic Christ, the Savior of all the world?

Ruth and Naomi both opened their hearts to the possibility of goodness across nations. Martin Luther was thrilled to see his work as flowing from the same well-spring as the Church in Ethiopia. In Luther’s letter of recommendation, he writes that what is different between them, “does not undermine the unity of the Church nor conflict with faith, because the Kingdom of Christ is spiritual righteousness of heart, fear of God, and trust through Christ. He goes on to say: “[W]e desire that all peoples acknowledge and glorify Christ and obey him through true trust in his mercy and through love of the neighbor.” This is the good news for all the earth. Amen.

Sources:

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