

Recently I had a guest speaker come talk to my ethics class. Of course, beforehand, I discreetly filled out the request form for an honorarium, because he was doing a kind and generous thing for me. But after his presentation, when he had left, a student from Liberia said, "You know, in my country, we would have given him something." I hastened to assure him that the speaker would be receiving a munificent (not) honorarium. But my student waved that aside. He said, "No, we would have given him something," indicating the rest of the class. He was just a little bit bothered, even though he understood the honorarium. He felt that the students themselves owed something to the speaker, that he had done *them* a solid. They were failing to express *their* appreciation. From this and other comments, I get glimpses inside my student's worldview, in which students are scholars who are obliged to all who help them learn.

Will Willimon said that when we cross borders, we engage in mission. The borders may be political, geographical, psychological, or sociological. Border-crossing is mission, because we swap or share worldviews, and solidify our kinship with "other". I think that's what makes the story of Ruth and Naomi so poignant, because they both cross borders because they must, and in the process they extend their web of relationship.

The first audience for this story would have known that Moabites, which is what Ruth is, are problematic. Their origin story is one of drunkenness and incest. Later, as the Israelites passed through Moab in their wanderings, the Moabites cursed them. Deuteronomy 23 says, "No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt." So from a policy standpoint, from the 30,000 feet up view, good people don't mess with Moabites. Down at

ground level, of course, it's another story. When famine strikes Judah and your family is starving, a reasonable person picks up the family and moves where there *is* food, which in the case of Naomi's family happened to be Moab. And when your sons grow up in Moab and the neighbors seem like nice people, it doesn't seem so bad for your boys to marry Moabite girls, which is what Mahlon and Chilion did. Ordinary people of good will tend to relate to each other personally, not as political symbols. They get to know each other and see through each other's eyes.

Tragedy strikes again, as we heard, with the deaths of all three husbands. And whereas Job went and sat on an ash heap and scraped his sores with shards of pottery, Naomi grimly picks herself up and starts back toward Judah in the ancient refugee dance of survival, away from the threat of death, toward food and safety. She's a pragmatist; she doesn't have time to compose laments and jeremiads at an unjust God. But in a way, Naomi is better off than Job was because instead of good-for-nothing Comforters who keep trying to blame Job for his misfortunes, Naomi has two daughters-in-law who love her very much and want to come with her. On the other hand, Job apparently has a reliable source of food, because he sits there complaining for 40 chapters and it's never about hunger. Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are all going to starve to death if they don't connect with extended family that can take care of them and, as Naomi points out to them, there is no future of that kind with her, because she has no more sons for them to marry.

Orpah makes the reasonable choice and opts to return to her mother's house, even though she leaves Naomi reluctantly. Ruth's decision is not reasonable. There is no way forward without extended family. And yet she goes forward, against the objections of Naomi,

as if she senses that there is some unseen possibility ahead. And she makes this very moving vow to Naomi, “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.”

We know the rest of the story—how once in Judah Naomi supports the two of them by gleaning in Boaz’s field, how he protects her from the unwanted attentions of his harvesters, how it turns out *he’s* a distant relative of Naomi’s husband, and although he is not obliged to, he fulfils the duty of a husband’s brother and marries Ruth. They have a son named Obed who begets Jesse, who begets David, who becomes the greatest king Israel has ever known. Ruth had been right: there was an unseen possibility ahead, the kinsman of Naomi’s husband. And for her *hesed*, her love in action, she lives happily ever after.

Look at how much border-crossing there was in this story. Ruth abdicates her Moabite roots so that she can stay with Naomi and help her survive. Naomi, perhaps with some misgivings, arrives back in Judah with a Moabite daughter-in-law and maybe a truculent air: Want to make something of it? Boaz looks at that Moabite woman and sees a generous and caring person, someone for whom all the old bad associations just make no sense. Each one of them has crossed a geographical or psychological or political border; they have gone as missionaries to strangers, and they have received the gift of wider vision. Where there was no possibility according to the rules, God made possibility arise from human relationships.

In 2012 a Syrian family by the name of Hadhad fled the civil war there, and four years later found themselves in a little town called Antigonish in Nova Scotia with next to nothing.<sup>i</sup> One of the adult sons, Tareq, had hoped to become a physician, but once in Nova Scotia, realized that they would need a more immediate way to support themselves. They began

making chocolate candy, and in 2018 they debuted their first chocolate bar, called Wantaqo'ti (pronounced Wan-tahk-oo-di), the Mi'kmaq (indigenous people of that area) word for peace. Tareq said he and his company felt the need to be part of the "noble process" of truth and reconciliation so they reached out to Mi'kmaq leaders to help translate and guide them during the process. "Peace is beautiful in every language," he said, and promised to develop chocolate bars named peace in Arabic, French, and Mandarin.

The company has done well enough that last February they committed to hiring 50 refugees by 2022, and to mentor 10 refugee-run start-ups over the next few years. Tareq said when he made the announcement, "Being a refugee is not a choice, it's not a decision, it's not a life goal. These people are fleeing their homes because of war, because of persecution. It is substantial and it's the responsibility for everyone to do his role in supporting these newcomers to Canada."

This is really beautiful and inspiring, and I'm especially touched by these Syrian immigrants' decision to consult with the indigenous people of that area in order to participate in truth and reconciliation. As Tareq said, most Canadians have the generosity of Indigenous people to thank for their successes in Canada, so they turned to the Mi'kmaq in recognition of their ancestors' kindness. But I'm especially struck by the comments of the more privileged residents of Antigonish: "I think a lot of people can relate to that coming to Canada and trying to make something new for yourself and make a good go at life," said Glenda Hanlon, who works at the factory. "Antigonish is known for embracing the new, the exciting, and have really come together to support this family ... every step of the way." "We're just so happy to have them here, and so happy that they have succeeded. They're really an example for a whole lot of

people,” said 82-year-old Pat Watson. “We welcomed them, and now they’re part of this community, and they’re helping to welcome everybody else.”

I’m struck by these comments, because at the 30,000 foot level, you would not expect small-town Euro-Canadians to be excited to welcome middle eastern Muslim refugees. It doesn’t sound like a set-up with a lot of good possibilities. But of course at ground level, ordinary human being to human being, possibilities become visible. They open up. Tareq Hadhad says of the decision to train more refugees, “The family really today are just saying that in this factory, the new factory, they will be able to deliver peace and their products to everyone in this country,” he said. “There is no limit. There is no limit for peace. There is no limit for Peace by Chocolate.”

In the story of Ruth, when calamity strikes God does not intervene to whisk people’s troubles away. The calamities are terrible, and must be endured. But when it looks like there’s really no way forward, the way forward turns out to be revealed in ordinary people who see the value of crossing borders. That’s how God opens up possibilities for life and flourishing, by helping us see through others’ eyes and recognize ourselves in the other.

*God of the people, when there seems like no possibility ahead, show us how to step forward and find the openings among ordinary people, in ordinary lives. May we ourselves make and be those openings, by your grace. Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/syrian-refugee-thanks-n-s-town-for-helping-him-find-success-by-opening-chocolate-factory>