

It's interesting to have the story of Ruth broken into sections like this, because you're forced to deal with just part of the story. [recap first part] the part I drew for today is characterized by suspense and risk-taking. Ruth and Naomi are back in Judah, scraping by on what Ruth can glean from the fields, so barely surviving. Naomi decides to venture another step, to see if they can improve their lot—but it's a terrible risk. Essentially she tells Ruth to approach this landowner Boaz in a very vulnerable way and see what he will offer her.

Ruth fixes herself up and goes to Boaz at night, as he is sleeping. Obviously this is risky, both physically and from the point of view of her reputation. Perhaps she knows enough about Boaz from observation to be pretty sure that he won't rape her, but she's also taking the chance that he'll look at her as cheap and undignified. In the past he's protected her from being harassed by his men, and he's been complimentary about the way she takes care of her mother-in-law. But now he could decide that that was a façade, and she's really not a person of dignity and substance. Her vulnerability is exacerbated by the fact that she's a Moabite, and so as a foreigner, less likely to be respected on that ground as well.

Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, helps me to see this story as a story about true belonging. Brown asked some middle school students what the difference was between fitting in and belonging, and they said, "Fitting in is when you want to be a part of something. Belonging is when others want you." [repeat] And then she observed, "... we are neuro-biologically hardwired for belonging and connection. We're hardwired to want it, and need it so much, that the first thing we do is sacrifice ourselves and who we are to achieve it."

So what we do—and this is especially true in middle school and high school—is to do things to ensure that we fit in, which then ensures that we *don't* have a sense of belonging. I think this happens at churches sometimes too, which is why I think it was genius for Crossroads to make it foundational to our identity that people come to church as exactly who they are.

But here's the catch: In order to be our authentic selves, we have to be willing *not* to fit in sometimes. We have to be willing or able to stand alone when it's necessary. So Brene Brown says, "your level of true belonging can never be greater than your willingness to be brave and stand by yourself." That kind of stinks, right? But look at how it plays out in the story of Ruth. She desperately needs to "fit in," in the sense that she needs the kind of community standing that will ensure shelter and regular meals. Can she also "belong," that is, be herself? She fixes herself up and goes to lie at the feet of Boaz as he sleeps. BUT when he wakes up, startled, and asks, "Who are you?" she responds truthfully and candidly about her agenda. "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin." She does not flirt, she does not entrap him or play games. She asks him to spread his cloak over her, which is literal but also has the sense of spreading his protection over her, and she cites her claim on him: he is her next of kin through her dead husband, and therefore is obligated to marry her in order to protect her. No false pretenses here, no playing roles.

And Boaz, as we've seen from earlier in the story, is honorable and responsible. He responds in kind. He acknowledges that she is attractive enough to have set her cap for a younger man, and he says there's actually another kinsman

more closely related than he is, but that he'll sort it out. I'm not saying that Boaz was compelled to respond well because Ruth was being so brave and honest, but I am saying that he was able to make a trustworthy response because he had gotten accurate information from Ruth. She was authentic with him; she didn't set him up for some kind of chess game with her. If he welcomes her, it's the real her and not a character she thought she needed to play.

I recently read an unrelated story that actually is related, about being one's authentic self. It's an anecdote by a journalist¹ of Indian heritage, who is often asked where he's from (the answer is Ohio). The subtext of the question is that you don't belong here, with varying levels of hostility, so it's not a question he enjoys answering. But here's his story:

This guy came to our house, an older, white manager of an electronics store, to install a stove. And he was installing the stove, and he's standing in my living room, and yet again, this question comes up, "Where are you from?" And he says it to me, standing in my house in Brooklyn, delivering a stove.

... in the most uncharitable but honest interpretation of the situation, he's like, "Why are you brown?" Like, "What's up with your brownness? Where are you from?" He wasn't looking for "Ohio." But in this moment, for some reason, I tried another thing, and I said, "I'm originally from Cleveland" — glazed-over look — "but — born in Cleveland, but originally from India. My family is Indian." Clearly, he got what he wanted. And then, in this awkward, un-P.C., lovely way, he's like, "I thought so. You know, my brother married an Indian woman. And our family was not a great family, but when she came into our family, it kind of fixed everything. And she's the light of our whole family. And I thought you might..." And it was actually a really transformative moment for me.

By any reading of "woke" America's standards, the guy was wrong. You don't ask a brown guy, in his living room in Brooklyn, where he's from. But when I somehow, for whatever random reason, decided to move past the small thing

¹ [anand giridharada](#)

and see what was there, what was actually there was a guy who had not been raised to have this conversation, trying to basically tell me, “I really like the country that you seem to me to be ancestrally from, because it saved my dysfunctional family.”

The stove guy was, however clumsily, being his authentic self. And the journalist received him that way, and they clicked into belonging. The journalist ends the story by asking how he can have more conversations like that, when two parties connect.

We are our worst selves when we are in the grip of fear. This section of the story of Ruth suggests that in taking risks and being authentic, we make it possible to connect and belong. Ruth couldn't control Boaz's response to her, so it was a real risk. But when he sent her out before sunrise to protect her reputation and gave her six measures of barley to take back to her mother-in-law, it was clear that Ruth's gamble had paid off, and that she had made a real and trustworthy connection with Boaz. It's a wonderful model to carry around in our heads as we try to overcome polarization and build the beloved community where we are.

<https://onbeing.org/programs/brene-brown-strong-back-soft-front-wild-heart-feb2018/>

Let us pray: God of grace, you have made us to be connected to all others, and we know you best when we feel the connection and love one another. Help us to be discerning about appropriate risks; help us not to be controlled by fear. May your gracious spirit buoy us up with confidence to be our own authentic selves and to be kind to the authentic selves of others, so that we may more fully live out the reality of your reign. Amen.