The Polyphony of Grace

When I married my partner, a friend made me a lovely piece of embroidery that said, “Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge,” and so on, from the book of Ruth. In those days, the third wave of feminism was cresting; it would break upon the shores of academia less than a year after our wedding.[1] As a feminist, I was moved by her gift, but not thrilled at the sentiment. What did Ruth’s declaration of abject submission—for so I heard it—have to do with feminist life?

These days, I see more in Ruth. Precarity and resilience. Earnest hope and callous exploitation. Intimacy and erasure. All that, too, is the book of Ruth. And it assuredly has a word for us today!

Many biblical texts reflect on diaspora, remembering Judeans in exile who turned toward home, toward the place where they knew most deeply who they were as God’s beloved people. The prophet Isaiah envisions a highway for the return of Jews from diaspora, a road on which “the redeemed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing.” Isa 35:8–10 Imagine younger returnees—those born in diaspora—joyous on the road, their eyes alight with expectation as they strain to glimpse the magnificent Jerusalem Temple.[2] But for seasoned members of the community, returning is more complicated. They sing the songs of Zion with tears in their eyes. They carry memories of wrenching loss, haunted by what they’d had to abandon decades earlier. You don’t just get over something like that.

Loss and displacement put entire communities at risk, with dire consequences far into the future. We're watching this unfold right now in Gaza. Traumatized families are living in the rubble of their homes; starvation is looming for many.[3] The Palestinian death toll has climbed past 25,000—two thirds of the dead are women and children—while global political discourse remains mired in dogmatism.

Dogmatism is "the tendency to lay down principles as undeniably true"[4] while ignoring evidence and the counter-positions of others. Dogmatism thrives on social media, but you can hear it anywhere, including at kitchen tables and in classrooms. Dogmatism is toxic. It shuts down dialogue and distorts authentic, honest community, turning "belonging" into something coercive.

The good news is, there's a remedy for dogmatism: **polyphony.**

"Polyphony" just means "many sounds,"[5] many voices. Many voices.

- In music, **polyphony** describes the use of two or more melodic lines in a single harmonious composition. Each line has its own integrity, being melodically independent *and* responsive to the larger composition.

- In literature, **polyphony** describes unmerged narrative voices, some antithetical to others, that together create a rich interplay of perspectives. If you're in a book club (I mean, other than the giant book club that is Yale), you know polyphony is huge in novels right now.[6]

The book of Ruth invites us into **polyphony**—

into harmony and dissonance, point and counterpoint,

movements of resistance and growth that make up real life in God.

In **polyphony**, we encounter grace: God's redeeming love at work,

Not in some monolithic fairy tale but in a dynamic network of entangled truths!

Ruth gives us **polyphony**. The bereaved Naomi is leaving Moab to go back to Judah, and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth wants to accompany her. In the polyphony of this exquisite book, the first melody we hear is <u>fidelity</u>**:** Ruth's famous declaration 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." <u>Yearning for home</u>. But Naomi is not having it, this burden to continue supporting her daughter-in-law economically. She snarls, "NO—it has been far more bitter for me than for you!" Ruth will not be deterred, and Naomi lapses into silence. Not a warm, companionable silence. A bitter silence.

<u>Bitterness</u> is the second melodic line in this artful composition. Arriving back in Judah, Naomi is unrecognizable, her face ravaged by what she's suffered. The women of Bethlehem literally don't know who she is. She says: "My name is no longer Naomi. Call me Mara"—bitter—"because the Almighty has dealt bitterness to me."[7] She does not mention Ruth. Naomi ignores this unwanted Moabite standing right next to her. That's how Naomi returns: not singing, as Isaiah had

envisioned, but broken by loss, disfigured by bitterness, and publicly cruel to the Moabite immigrant standing next to her.

All kinds of unpleasantness ensue. I've got to lay it out.

- First: Ruth is marked excessively, over and over again, as "the Moabite," underscoring her affiliation with Israel's despised enemy and making her hope of belonging, "your people shall be my people," seem heartbreakingly naïve in retrospect.
- Second: Ruth proposes that she work alone in a random field. Though she'll be at serious risk of harassment, Naomi says, "Go ahead," without a word of warning.[8] Ruth gleans for hours without stopping, with no guarantee of compensation. Migrant labor with no protection.
- Third: Naomi dispatches Ruth late at night to the threshing floor, where only male laborers and sex workers will be, having instructed Ruth how to lure a wealthy landowner into sleeping with her. This sexual entrapment plan puts Ruth at extreme risk, something that's explicitly clear in the storytelling.
- Naomi's strategy works, and Ruth is "acquired" by the landowner—that's his insulting language when he announces it in the public square. Ruth gives birth, and Naomi immediately appropriates the baby as her own. Ruth's labor, in the fields and in childbirth, has been commodified by the community, and she's erased from the rest of the story.

Feminist and decolonizing readers have seen many parallels between Ruth's story and what happens to migrant laborers, persons trafficked for sex work,[9] and

refugees treated as "perpetual foreigners."[10] Others still manage to read Ruth as an idyllic tale of fidelity and abundance. Polyphony: those elements are there, though I believe they're being heavily ironized. Still others cherish the book as a queer love story. Polyphony: I honor that reading, even as I call out how heartless Naomi is toward Ruth at every turn. The melodic line that's most audible to me is the grim fate of migrants oppressed by the economic predations of empire—the Davidic monarchy, named at the end of the book as the result of all this,[11] but relevant also for later extractive economies, including our own late capitalism.

Friends, we have to tell the whole truth! That's how we remember who we are, how we remember where home is! We worship an incarnate Holy One whose **polyphony of grace** calls us to tell all of these truths. To celebrate feminist and queer solidarity while candidly naming the wounds of intersectional injustice. To praise God for the abundance of harvest while advocating fiercely for the rights of migrants and other disenfranchised workers.

There is incarnational good news in the polyphony of our sacred texts! These entangled witnesses tell the *incarnational truth* of love and woundedness. When dogmatism threatens to make your ethics brittle, your theology narrow, or your notion of community into something coercive: RESIST!

Resist—and lift up the **polyphony of grace**, as you turn, with so many others, toward home. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

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Ruth 1:1–18; Psalm 146

Preached in Marquand Chapel at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut

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[1] As a matter of convenience, many of us identify the beginning of the third wave of feminist advocacy for gender justice with the 1990 publication of Judith Butler's book, *Gender Trouble*.

[2] The narrative setting of Ruth is the time of the judges, when Solomon's Temple had not yet been built, but of course, the setting within a story should not be confused with the time when the piece of literature was actually composed. Here, I imagine returnees coming back to the rebuilt Temple of the Persian era, in line with the position of many scholars that the book of Ruth was likely crafted in the Second Temple period. I am persuaded that Ruth addresses the complexities of lineage and return from a postexilic perspective.

[3] On the hunger crisis in Gaza, see: World Food Programme, "Gaza—Food Security Assessment," 14 December 2023; *The New Yorker*, "Gaza is Starving," 3 January 2024; *Time*, "How Experts Believe Starvation is Being Utilized in Gaza," 6 January 2024; Islamic Relief, "Gaza Now the World's Worst Hunger Crisis and On the Verge of Famine," 9 January 2024; Reuters, "Fears of Famine in Gaza as Hunger Hits Crisis Levels," 17 January 2024; *The New York Times*, "Gaza's Food Crisis," 29 January 2024.

[4] "Dogmatism" in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) online, accessed 27 January 2024.

[5] "Polyphony" is "a multiplicity of sounds or voices," per the OED online, accessed 27 January 2024.

[6] My homiletical imagination and ethical resistance to capitalist exploitation of migrant laborers have been strengthened by two novels that use polyphony: Jess Walter's 2021 novel**,** *The Cold Millions* (Harper Perennial), and Sofía Segovia's 2019 novel, *The Murmur of Bees*, translated by Simon Bruni (Amazon Crossing).

[7] The NRSV "the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me" is poor English; the adverb implies that it is the deity who is bitter. I prefer to render קְרָאן לִי מָרָא כִּי־הֵמַר שַׁדַּי לִי מְאֹד: as, "Call me Mara, for Shaddai has made exceeding bitterness my lot." In this sermon, I cannot change many words from the NRSV text listeners have heard without explaining, so I have chosen "has dealt *bitterness* to me," the noun in English being the most economical way to move forward.

[8] The threat of sexual violence is openly acknowledged by this ancient text; see Ruth 2:8–9.

[9] The last time Ruth speaks—long before the end of the narrative—is when she goes home after sleeping with Boaz and tells Naomi, the woman who sent her there for sex work, "Look, he gave me six measures of barley, for he said, 'Do not go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'" It is a wrenching moment, the vulnerable and manipulated Ruth showing Naomi that her sex work, which had put at grave risk Ruth's physical safety and social reputation (transparently evident from Boaz's reflection, "'It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor,'" 3:14), did yield the hoped-for economic benefit.

[10] On the complexities of characterization in Ruth, see essays in Athalya Brenner, ed. *Ruth and Esther*, Feminist Companion to the Bible[2] (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), esp. those by Bonnie Honig, Laura Donaldson, Judith McKinlay, and Athalya Brenner; Tod Linafelt, *Ruth*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 116–121; Yee, Gale A. "'She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn': Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority," pp. 119–140 in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); Charles Halton, "An Indecent Proposal: The Theological Core of the Book of Ruth," *SJOT* 26 (2012): 31–43; Fulata Lusungu Moyo, "'Traffic Violations': Hospitality, Foreignness, and Exploitation: A Contextual Biblical Study of Ruth," *JFSR* 32 (2016): 83–94; Jennifer L. Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives*, Series on Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2011); Rhiannon Graybill, "'Even unto this Bitter Loving': Unhappiness and Backward Feeling in Ruth," *BibInt* 29 (2021): 308–331. See also two essays in progress for *Transgressive Readings*, ed. Yung Suk Kim, under contract in 2024 with Pickwick: Song "Suzie" Park, "Invisible Labor and the Erasure of Ruth," and Robert Wafawanaka, "Decolonizing Ruth, Reading and 'Un-reading' Ruth with African Eyes: Masculinity, Disability, and Survival."

[11] "Revealing" imperial predations either purposefully or inadvertently. I believe the ancient author intends to mock David's linkage to non-Judean and non-Israelite peoples by associating him with a Moabite woman who gains Judean resources through scheming and sexualized entrapment. That Ruth is lauded by the cuckolded Boaz and the same women of Bethlehem who could not recognize Naomi earlier in the story should not be read as the position also of the *narrator* and/or the author of the story. The association with David is crystal clear in the Davidic genealogy appended to the story (Ruth 4:17–22); some scholars read the purpose of the

genealogy as being apologetic *in favor of* David, but this case is extremely difficult to sustain.