

OUT OF CONTEXT - CULTURAL CONTEXT
A SERMON BASED ON RUTH 2:1-23
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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10:00 a.m.

Our sermon series this month is called 'Out of Context'.

It is phrase we know well.

We see it particularly in quotations when a few words are pulled out
and taken away from the words around them.

By being taken 'out of context',
the meaning changes.

So for example,

A movie reviewer lets call her Jane French, might say,

'This was the best movie of the year,
if it is the only movie you see this year.'

The Hollywood studio puts on its poster

Jane French says this was quote

'this was the best movie of the year'.

You need context.

One of the things that I love,
which feeds my inner nerd, nah, my full on nerd,
is learning and understanding where words come from.

Context comes from the Latin.

Con, means together.

We say conjoined twins.

Twins who are joined together.

Texere is to weave.

It's the same place we get our word textile, cloth, clothes.

So context is something that is weaved together.

If you pull it apart,

it is no longer what it was.

Knit yarn together you can have a hat.

But take it apart, unravel it, take it out of context,

unravel it, and it is just yarn, not a hat.

Take a few words out of their context, unravel them,
they know longer mean what they originally meant.
They've been unravelled, and pulled apart,
and are no longer what they once were.

Context is critical to understanding.

Without it, what you have, may not be what you think it is.

Last week we looked at the Bible's place in our modern context.

For the next few weeks we will look at type of contexts
within the Bible itself.

This week we look at the cultural context.

There is a famous definition of culture by American anthropologist

Clifford Geertz in his book of essays

'The Interpretation of Cultures'.

He defined culture as

'the webs of significance that people have spun'.¹

¹ <https://marumatchbox.com/blog/cultural-framing-why-context-is-crucial/>

An action can have significant meaning in one culture,
and mean nothing, or something different in another.

The culture is what significance is attached to it.

So take an action like removing your hat if you're a man.

Removing your hat isn't really anything if you think about the action.

But layer in the web of significance in western culture.

It is considered an indication of respect.

But even within our culture,

there is a difference

in the perceived significance among those who are older,

and those who are younger.

I don't know this to be true,

but it is possible that removing your hat in a different culture

could have an entirely different meaning,

or perhaps none at all.

It is important to know the cultural context.

You may remember the television series Seinfeld from back in the 90's.

In one episode, Jerry the main character,

is having breakfast in the restaurant with his friends
Elaine and George.

Jerry has ordered half a grapefruit and when he puts his spoon into it,
grapefruit juice squirts into George's eye.

It's acidic, and George's one eye is burning, and closes on its own.
It looks like he's winking.

George goes to work.

His boss asks him about a coworker.

"Is Foreman doing okay? He's been late for work a lot lately."

George says, 'Yeah, he's doing fine.'

Then because of the grapefruit juice,
he winks.

His boss says, 'Ah, right, okay, thanks for that.'

The wink carries meaning.

I'm saying one thing. I mean the opposite.

Foreman comes in with his wife beside him later in the day.

He tells George his lunch will be a little longer.

He's going for lunch with his wife, then after that, a massage.

George says, 'A massage, nice.' Then his eye closes.

Foreman gets into big trouble with his wife.

George winked.

Therefore, it's not a massage.

All through the episode, George gets into trouble because his one eye

keeps closing from his morning collision with grapefruit juice.

Everyone thinks he means the opposite of what he says.

It's just an eye closing,

but cultural context gives it meaning.

It is 'the webs of significance that people have spun' around certain actions.

Given the two thousand year age of the Bible

we need to work at understanding the cultural context

as best as we are able.

If we want to understand the significance of what is happening

in what we read, we have to do some work with culture.

Otherwise we might miss that someone has removed their hat

in that moment,
or that really,
the person just has grapefruit juice in their eye.

To help us experience first had the cultural context in the Bible,
today we have gone to the story of Ruth.

The very most important thing you must know about Ruth,
is that Ruth was from Moab.

Now, if you are a normal person,
you have no clue what that means in 2019 Canada.
We wouldn't by any reasonable means
have that cultural context.

Yet, it is the very most important thing to know about Ruth.

Ruth was from Moab.

The book of Ruth in the Bible,
is a story of family,
a story of who's in the family.
Ruth was not from the inside.

She was from a foreign country.

Different customs, different language, different culture
different religion.

Ruth was from Moab.

This book of the Bible makes sure you don't forget it.

Almost every time her name is mentioned,
there is a comma, and her nationality.

Ruth, the Moabite.

Who is that there?

That's Ruth, the Moabite.

and she was accompanied by Ruth, the Moabite.

Did I mention Ruth was a Moabite?

Imagine referring to people that way continuously.

That's Saul, the African.

That's Les, the Hungarian.

That's Connie, the Scot.

That's Christina, the Korean.

That's Patty, the Anishinabee

That's Ruth, the Moabite.

Continually stating it, is a way to put emphasis
on the fact that she is from the outside.

Ruth, the Moabite was an outsider.

You can get that feeling.

We've all felt like an outsider at times.

Sometimes you'll hear it around town here.

How long have you lived in Chippawa?

53 years? Oh, so you're not from here.

Where are you from?

An outsider, different, a stranger.

We've all felt that way at times.

But, if you don't know where Moab is,

you aren't going to be hit by the cultural context

and therefore the powerful emotional impact of this statement
in the text.

Moab was located in what is modern day Jordan.

Ruth, the Moabite, was an Arab.

Her mother-in-law, Naomi, was a Jew.

Naomi, the Jew, had a daughter-in-law, who was an Arab.

Think about the news in the past years, decades, centuries,

Palestinians, Jews, Gaza, Jerusalem, Iraq, Syria

and you'll start to understand the importance of this story.

Ruth, the Arab, the Moabite was Naomi the Jew's, daughter-in-law.

Naomi had moved to Moab from Judah with her husband Elimelech.

There had been a famine in Judah.

And just like Newfoundlanders move to Calgary to feed their families,

Elimelech and Naomi moved to Moab with their sons.

Elimelech passed away.

Naomi still had her two sons to support her.

They married Moabite women.

Ruth, and Orpah.

Tragedy struck again,

Both Naomi's sons died.

All three women were widowed.

Again, there is cultural context.

To be widowed and without children in that time was to be without any,

social safety net.

Family was the social safety net.

In that time being widowed also meant they were also destitute.

Women didn't work.

Women didn't have means to support themselves.

Without a man to belong to,

they had nothing

and had become nothing.

Naomi made the decision to go back to Judah.

Ruth and Orpah started the journey with her.

Naomi insisted they go home, find a new husband, start over.

Orpah relented and went home.

Ruth refused.

Ruth, the Arab,

Ruth, the Moabite makes an incredible promise to Naomi.

Sometimes you will hear the promise read at weddings,

but understand this is the promise of a young Arab widow

to an old Jewish widow.

Two women with no prospects.

And Ruth, the Moabite, the foreigner, the one outside the faith
stays.

‘Where you go, I will go.

Where you stay, I will stay.

Your people will be my people.

Your God will be my God.’

Back in Judah, they had to find a way to make their way.

Ruth, the Moabite, said to Naomi,

let me go and glean in the fields.

Basically it is a step away from begging.

People, typically women, would follow behind the grain harvesters
and pick up grain that got dropped.

Imagine picking up grains of barley, or wheat by the grain
in order to feed your family.

The Bible says, as it turned out,

which is code for,

God had been busy behind the scenes.

As it turned out, Ruth was in a field that belonged to Boaz.

Boaz was a decent man.

He was from Elimelech's extended family,

which meant he was eligible to help care for Ruth and Naomi.

He was a kinsman - redeemer

The phrase is kinsman. Your kin.

Redeemer. The one who buys you back.

He could pick up all Elimelech's widows, land and holdings

as long as he let Elimelech's name carry on.

It was like receiving an inheritance

with a condition you preserve the family name.

But more than all that, Boaz was smitten.

He asked the foreman of the harvest

Whose young woman is that?

They answered, "Her? That woman is an Arab.

She came back with Naomi.

She asked if she could glean here today."

Boaz spoke to her.

Told her to stay and work in his field.

Told her to stay with his servant girls so she'd be safe.

Told her he had instructed his men to keep their hands off her.

Told her to help herself to water whenever she wanted.

He invited her to come and eat with the harvesters.

He told the harvesters to drop extra grain where she was gleaning.

Ruth came home that day, fed, with leftovers,

and with half a bushel of grain.

It was an unheard of amount.

Naomi was shocked.

Where did you glean today?

Where did you work?

Blessed be the man who took notice of you.

Ruth told her.

It was Boaz.

Naomi was shocked again.

After losing her husband,
after losing her sons,
after coming to nothing
she had also come to believe
that God had nothing left for her.
She wanted people to call her Mara, bitter.

With this grain,
with the arrival of Boaz came this realization.
She said,
'The Lord has not stopped showing his kindness.
That man is our close relative.
He is one of our kinsman redeemers.'

The book of Ruth goes on to tell the story of how Boaz the Jew
and Ruth, the Moabite, the Arab,
came to be married and how Ruth
an outsider, became an insider
and more than an insider, part of the family.

The story ends with a genealogy.

Salmon was the father of Boaz.

Boaz the father of Obed.

Obed the father of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of David.

Yes, that David. King of Israel, man after God's own heart.

King David's great grandmother,

was an Arab.

Ruth, the Moabite.

So we learn from this cultural context, that,

God's family tree isn't grown from genetics.

God's family tree isn't grown from geography or nationality or language.

God's family tree isn't grown from a parent's decision.

God's family tree grows when a heart is freely promised and given to him.

'Where you go, I'll go.

Where you stay, I'll stay.'

God's family tree grows when that heart is redeemed

taken back into possession by Jesus Christ, our redeemer.

God's family tree grows when we realize
that belonging to the family of God
replaces the emptiness and bitterness,
when we realize God has not stopped showing his kindness.

It's a lesson that we can bring into our own cultural context.

A number of years ago there was a popular television show
called Friday Night Lights.

The show follows the stories of a number of people and families
in the fictional West Texas town of Dillon.

It is a town that has centred itself around high school football.

One of the characters is Tyra Collette.

Tyra is the school vixen.

She lives out in the country in a run down house.

Some would label her 'white trash' with no future.

Tyra decided to reach for college,

to make the attempt to get out of Dillon

and build a new life for herself.

In one episode, her friend Landry, who is a straight A student,

is helping her write her college application essay.

He's told her first draft was terrible. Fake and without conviction.

He pushes at her to the point where she explodes in anger at him.

What should I write about?

My trashy family,

about the fact that my sister's a stripper,

or my mom is a high school drop out

who drinks boxes of wine like it's water?

Or about the fact that I lost my virginity when I was thirteen,

or the fact that my papa wasn't around?

How about that? Oh, I know.

I could write about how up until two years ago

I had enough hate in my heart to start a freaking car.

Landry asked her.

'What changed?'

She looked at him in confusion and hesitation.

"What changed that you stopped

having enough hate in your heart to start a frickin' car?"

She answered,

Jason Street got paralyzed.

I realized that he was this great guy, I mean, like, the quarterback,
this hero, and it happened to him.

And it made me realize that life isn't fair for anybody, not just me.

All right, and what else?

I don't know. I became friends with Julie.

And Mrs. Taylor started to take some interest in me.

I started doing my homework.

You. I met you.

I started to feel like I was on the inside instead of the outside.

Naomi wanted to call herself Mara, bitter.

Then she saw,

in the heart of a Moabite who could share her own heart,
the Lord has not stopped showing his kindness.

When did it change for you?

When did you come inside?

When will you?

John 1 says,

To all who receive him,

to those who believe in his name,

he gives the right to become children of God,

children born,

not of natural descent,

nor a human decision,

or a husband's will.

Born of God.

Making you a sister of Christ.

Making you a brother of Christ.

Letting Jesus redeem your heart,

giving Jesus your heart puts you on the inside of God's family.

The Psalmist tells us what God does with the outsider.

God says,

I will record Rahab, who was a Canaanite
and Babylon, which is today's Iraq
Philistia, which is today Palestinian
Tyre, which is Lebanon
and Cush which is Ethiopia
God says, I will say,

 This one, was born in Zion.

 This one is mine.

The heart that is given to God,
 even the heart of you Moabites,
 is a heart carried inside God's heart.

Amen.