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In the 1970s I was introduced to the novels of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the 20th century Russian novelist and dissident. Like with other Russian authors like Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy, most of Solzhenitsyn novels are long—and I mean long—with many characters and deciding to read them took a bit of extra courage and focus. I read Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward* while living and working in a hydro construction camp in northern Manitoba. It was tough sledding, for some reason. *The First Circle* I found much more enjoyable. I read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a mere 200 pages, as part of a course in Bible college. It tells the story, as the title suggests, of what one day in a Soviet prison camp was like for the main character. Solzhenitsyn also wrote a 3-volume set on what life was like in the Gulag Archipelago, the Soviet prison camps in Siberia. Those stories came from his personal experience. And this gets us to why I start a sermon on Ruth with reference to Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

The important question here is: Why was Solzhenitsyn in a Soviet prison camp? The answer is that he was deemed to be a threat to the Soviet Communist regime. But how could a novelist be a danger? He did not carry a gun. He did not run for political office. He did not call for violent revolution. All he did was write novels. But that is exactly what he did and the very writing and publishing of novels was perceived as a threat to the leaders in the Kremlin. It proved again, as it has many times through the centuries, that “The pen is mightier than the sword,” a line quoted often, originating from a 19th century English play. Tyrants and dictators have always feared authors. A man or woman with a sword or gun is easily disposed of. You simply kill them. On the other hand, the ideas and writings of storytellers take on a life of their own, whether or not the author survives, and stories with their powerful ideas and images and scenes that evoke imagination and emotion stay on in the hearts and minds of readers and listeners and can motivate to creative and courageous action. Such is the power of the pen and the stories these pens help produce.

This use of the pen and story to change hearts and minds and transform society goes back centuries, millennia even, and brings us to the story of Ruth, a subversive romance. To understand the story and why it was subversive, I have to give a brief history lesson. In the 6th

¹ The sermon is mine. The idea of reading Ruth as a “subversive romance” comes from Brian Zahnd, pastor of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, MI.

century BCE, before the time of Jesus, many of the Jews from Judah had been taken captive to Babylon. Those who remained in Jerusalem and the surrounding area tried to do the best they could to survive and get on with life.

About 70 years after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and the Great Deportation into Exile, Ezra, a priest, and Nehemiah, who became governor and a leader in the restoration of life in Judah, traveled from Babylon to Judah. They were horrified at what they saw. Ezra and Nehemiah knew the Ancient Law and they knew that the Book of Deuteronomy made it clear: “No Ammonite or Moabite is to enter the congregation of GOD, even to the tenth generation, nor any of [their] children, ever.”² Surely the people knew this! And yet when Ezra and Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem and the area around the city, they discovered that many of the Jewish men had taken Moabite women as wives and by now had families with them. The two leaders took immediate and drastic action. They ordered that the Jewish men should divorce their wives, NOW, and send the women and their children back to Moab. They had no place with God’s people. If the men were to comply, they were going to condemn their wives and children to abject poverty at the best and starvation at the worst. Women and children in that day, without a father, husband, brother or uncle to care for them, were in dangerous territory.

It is during this time that someone, seeing what was happening, wrote the story of Ruth, a story about something important, especially relevant for what was going on under Ezra and Nehemiah, something that had happened about 400 years earlier.

The story opens with a famine in Bethlehem. Ironically, the name Bethlehem means “house of bread.” There weren’t no bread to be had in Bethlehem. A man by the name of Elimelech decided to take his wife, Naomi, and their two sons and move to Moab where food was abundant. In time Elimelech died and the two boys became young men. They found young women that caught their eyes and hearts and married these Moabite women. One was Orpah; the other Ruth. Ten years later, the two men also died and the three women were left with no one to care for them.

Around this time Naomi heard that Bethlehem was again indeed the “house of bread” and decided to go back to her people. Orpah and Ruth accompanied their mother-in-law along the journey. When they got to the border between Moab and Judah, Naomi turned to the younger women and told them they needed to go back to their home community. “Look at me,” Naomi said. “I am too old to have another husband. And, even if I did get a husband and got pregnant tonight, would you wait around till the boys are old enough to get married? Go back home. Your life is there.”

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and turned to go back. Ruth, however, Ruth clung to Naomi and insisted she was staying with the older woman. It is then she spoke the famous words of commitment that today often make it into marriage ceremonies.

Once the two women got to Bethlehem, they still faced the need to feed themselves. It might be the “house of bread” but the bread still needed wheat or barley. Elimelech’s piece of land was still available to them but women did not work the fields. Fortunately for them, Judah had a welfare system, instituted by Yahweh. All farmers were told to make sure they did not harvest right to the corners of the field. In each field there was supposed to be wheat or barley left standing for the poor to help themselves. And so, when harvest arrived, Naomi sent Ruth to

² Deut 23:3. *The Message*.

glean in the fields, gathering stalks of grain from the corners as well as stalks dropped by the harvesters.

Ruth happened to glean in the fields of Boaz, a distant relative of Elimelech's. The young woman caught Boaz's eye. After asking around to see who she was, he instructed the harvesters to make sure they dropped extra stalks of grain in her path so that gleaning enough would be even easier. He also told Ruth not to bother to go to other fields. He would make sure there would be enough and more for her and Naomi in his fields.

When Ruth came home at the end of the day and Naomi saw how much grain she had gleaned, she was curious. When Ruth told her what happened, Naomi, ever the wise and scheming woman, decided luck might indeed be with them. Near the end of the harvest season Naomi told Ruth one day to take a bath, to put on oil and perfume, and to dress in her nicest robe. Then she gave Ruth her instructions: "I hear Boaz and his men are winnowing barley at the threshing floor today. Go over and hide and watch. When they have eaten and had their wine, watch where Boaz lies down to sleep. Once he and the men are asleep, go quietly, uncover his feet, and lie down. From there, you go with whatever Boaz says." "Uncover his feet" was a euphemism for something significantly more seductive.

The plan worked to perfection. At midnight Boaz woke and discovered this young woman, lying at his feet—nudge, nudge, wink, wink. After determining who she was, he told her he wanted to marry her. However, another relative, a relative closer to Elimelech and Ruth's husband, had first dibs. Boaz promised he would talk to the relative and if the man did not want Ruth for his wife, Boaz and Ruth would get married. In the mean time, she was to stay with him for the balance of the night. Early, before anyone else was awake, Boaz told Ruth to sneak out of camp so no one would know what happened.

Suiting action to his words, Boaz consulted with the relative who said he was not interested in Ruth. That cleared the path for Boaz and Ruth to get married. As often happens when a man and a woman get married, Ruth became pregnant and nine months later gave birth to a baby boy. They named him Obed.

And then came the punch line, the thing the entire story had been leading up to: "Obed became the father of Jesse, the father of David."

The listeners would have sat back and said to each other: "That's a good story." And then stopped themselves, turned to the story teller and asked: "What did you say?! What was that last line?!" The Storyteller would have answered: "Ruth's son, Obed, became the father of Jesse, the father of David."

"Are you serious?! That can't be! Are you saying that the great King David, a man after the heart of God, God's gift to the people of Israel was the great-grandson of a Moabite woman?! Not 10 generations removed but only 3?!" That was enough to distort their reality beyond recognition and turn their world topsy-turvy. Everything they believed about being God's specially chosen people was shattered. That meant what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing was wrong! That meant what Deuteronomy said was not to be followed. That meant a whole new reality, a whole new way of ordering society, a whole new way of describing faithfulness to Yahweh had arrived. And if you could not trust what Deuteronomy said about Moabites, what in the Ancient Writings could you trust? Subversive indeed. The story would have sent all self-respecting priests and rabbis into a fit. This was a story that had to be shut down. Yet it wasn't

and it became a part of that collection of books that spoke Yahweh's word to the people and still speaks it to us today.

Ruth's and Boaz's love story is not the only subversive story in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the OT today. There are others. There is also profound poetry, And the Ancient Folk Singers wrote subversive song lyrics to rival anything that came out of the 1960s. Powerful, moving, profound, and subversive, shaking the very foundations of religion and politics when they were written and/or sung and still vivid and powerful enough to create fear in the hearts and minds of leaders and followers of Christianity today.

And then there is the story of Jesus of Nazareth, another powerful, subversive story, linked to the romantic story we just heard. I don't think the bishops who assembled our NT in the 4th century CE at the direction of Roman Emperor Constantine were aware of what they were doing when they started the collection of 4 Gospels with Matthew's Good News Story Collection and its opening genealogy. Genealogies of the day focused on men. Women were secondary. Yet, Jesus' genealogy in Matthew includes 5 women, Ruth, the Moabite among them. Deuteronomy said clearly no descendant of a mixed, Jew/Moabite relationship was ever to be part of God's people. That meant Jesus was out. Yet, Jesus was in, not only in but at the very center, named Immanuel—God with us. "God with us" was a descendant of a forbidden relationship, an outsider, one never to be invited in. Now that is subversive. Was then, Is now.

The others were Tamar who seduced her father-in-law to make a point about justice, Rahab, the brothel madam, Bethsheba, the stolen wife, and Mary, the pregnant, unwed teenager. Not really something that upright, well-respected religious folks would brag about, or even allow out of the closet. Yet that is where Jesus' story starts and the subversiveness of it continues. Then, at the end of the 4th Good News Story Collection, Pastor John tells us about the mandate Jesus gave his disciples that first Easter Sunday evening, a mandate meant for all time: "As my father sent me, so send I you."

Our world today needs subversive storytelling and subversive folk song singing as much as it ever has. Two weeks ago I received an email that read, in part: "..... I really would like to know how we are as a people to get back to having respect, and no judgement. We are to respect others and not to judge our neighbours. We don't have to agree but we have to live together in this world!" Indeed, that is the question today for it is the mother of all questions when it comes to the human condition. How can that happen turn the human condition around? By all those who hear and respect Jesus' call and mandate to tell subversive stories, sing subversive songs, read subversive poems, and live subversive lives.

I suggest nowhere is this more necessary than within Christianity itself, a Christianity that sometimes seems to have sold out entirely to the prevailing narrative and has lost all sense of the call to be subversive. Christianity needs to have its very foundation shaken and cracked and its edifice brought crumbling down. American and Canadian Evangelicalism along with its Christian nationalism, an idolatrous anachronism if there ever was one. Catholic Christianity and its need for a sin sacrifice. Mennonite denominations and United Church churches (except for First United, of course). Their members are often practically indistinguishable from the society at large, telling Society's stories and singing Society's songs. If there is to be any hope for our world and the transformation of society and the healing of people that Jesus came to bring, we—you and I—will need to tell subversive stories, sing subversive songs, read subversive poetry, and live subversive lives.