

Manningham Uniting Church
Summer Series on the Book of Ruth
21st January 2024
Text: Ruth Chapter 3
Theme: Hope for the Stereotyped

Introduction

Good morning.

Since 2019 the Uniting Church has marked a Day of Mourning on the Sunday before 26 January to reflect on the dispossession of Australia's First Peoples and the ongoing injustices faced by First Nations people in this land. We are invited to continue to reflect on the effects of invasion, colonisation and racism on First Peoples.

Let us pray...

God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not. And all God's people say, **AMEN**.

Morning, I wonder how many of you have watched the TED Talk – The Danger of a Single Story? What do you think of the talk?

This morning we continue our Summer Series on The Book of Ruth. On the first Sunday, we reflected on **Hope in Difficult Times** and on the second Sunday, we reflected on **Hope for the Marginalised**. This morning we are reflecting on **Hope for the Stereotyped**.

What is a stereotype? Stereotype is a pervasive and persistent human tendency that stems from a basic cognitive need to categorize, simplify, and process the complex world. This tendency is a precondition for social bias, prejudice, and discrimination.

One of the most prominent descriptions of Ruth is as a Moabitess, a member of a negatively viewed outgroup according to social identity theory. Within this theory, stereotypes are generalisations about people based on dyadic relationships or group membership.

It is the understanding that each member of a particular group shares the same qualities. Hence, a specific group member is assumed to be, and treated as, identical to other group members.

I don't know whether you are aware of it or not 'ingroup' stereotyping is generally positive, the stereotypes of 'outgroups' tend to be negative.

In some ways, it seems inevitable in that, it enables us to respond quickly to certain situations because we can apply for the benefit of select prior experience.

Where stereotyping becomes dangerous is when we ignore differences between individuals in that people group.

Stereotypes simplify our social world and reduce the amount of data we have to process our social interactions. That's probably one of the reasons why we stereotype.

It is easier to say that all Chinese people are good at maths, all Indians are good at yoga, all Moabites lack generosity, and all First Peoples are lazy. You and I know that these generalisations are not true. In short, stereotypes are dangerous and can lead to prejudice and racism.

Stereotypes are incomplete and inaccurate beliefs that some people hold about groups of other people.

Author of Time Wise explains that when a white person does something murderous or incompetent, there's a tendency to attribute this action solely to the individual. Conversely, when a racial minority does something murderous or incompetent, this behaviour is often viewed as representative of that person's entire race of people, who are then stereotyped accordingly.

Before we look at Chapter 3 of the Book of Ruth, we need to know the history of the Moabites.

Now probably everyone in Naomi's hometown of Bethlehem would have known the Moabite stereotype. According to Israel's religious and historical tradition the Moabites were "the descendants of deception and incest."

It goes back to Lot, Abraham's nephew from about 800 years before Ruth was born. Genesis 19 tells us that after being delivered out from the destruction of Sodom, Lot hid out in a cave. His own daughters plied him with drink and seduced him. From this incestuous disgrace arose the Moabite clan, and the stereotype Ruth inherited hundreds of years later.

So imagine the gossip in Bethlehem on the day widow Naomi and her widowed daughter-in-law Ruth walked into town: *"Who's that with Naomi? A Moabite girl? Well, we all know what they're like! You watch, she'll be up to no good I bet."*

Now imagine in your mind's eye the scene portrayed in Ruth chapter three. After a hard day in the fields, Boaz has eaten supper, and probably drank wine too – "his heart was merry." He settles down on a pile of harvested grain to sleep. On Naomi's instructions, Ruth approaches him in the dark silence of the night. All the signs point to the Moabite stereotype playing itself out. It's like the seduction of Lot all over again.

Right? Wrong! Ruth shattered the Moabite stereotype. And for me, that's one of the reasons the story of Ruth is such a delight.

Let's look at what happened in Ruth chapter three. Ruth is praised by Boaz for her dignity and integrity: she hadn't gone chasing after all manner of men, and she demonstrated through her modesty that she was not to be tarred with the brush of her ancestors. She broke the stereotype and proved herself a woman of honour. Consequently, Boaz claimed her as his wife, and by divine grace, she became the great-grandmother of David, king of Israel.

Now that most of you have watched, *The Danger of Single Story* you understand what Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie is trying to say.

I would like to quote a few paragraphs from her TED Talk: *"I come from a conventional, middle-class Nigerian family. My father was a professor. My mother was an administrator. And so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help, who would often come from nearby rural villages. So, the year I turned eight, we got a new house boy. His name was Fide. The only thing my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor.*

My mother sent yams and rice, and our old clothes, to his family. And when I didn't finish my dinner, my mother would say, "Finish your food! Don't you know? People like Fide's family have nothing." So, I felt enormous pity for Fide's family.

Then one Saturday, we went to his village to visit, and his mother showed us a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made. I was startled. It had not occurred to me that anybody in his family could actually make something. All I had heard about them was how poor they were, so it had become impossible for me to see them as anything else but poor. Their poverty was my single story of them.

Years later, I thought about this when I left Nigeria to go to university in the United States. I was 19. My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language.

She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove.

What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity.

My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, and no possibility of a connection as human equals."

Remember the danger of a single story.

Again, she said: "So, after I had spent some years in the U.S. as an African, I began to understand my roommate's response to me. If I had not grown up in Nigeria, and if all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner. I would see Africans in the same way that I, as a child, had seen Fide's family . . .

And so, I began to realize that my American roommate must have throughout her life seen and heard different versions of this single story . . ."

What is the danger of a single story?

Adichie asserts that media and literature available to the public often only tell one story, which causes people to generalise and make assumptions about groups of people. I wonder what's the single-story that we have attributed to Ruth over the years? Any suggestions? Single story and stereotyping are conjoined twins.

Now do you know what's wrong with stereotyping? In stereotyping, we infer that an individual has the characteristics we already assumed all members of their group have. Remember negative stereotyping often leads to prejudice and biases.

Now I want to turn to our First Peoples. Remember the referendum on the Voice? Some of those who were against the referendum tried to highlight that there were First Nations people who didn't support the plan. We know Warren Mundine, a former Labour Party national president, heads the 'Recognise a Better Way' group that led a campaign calling for Australians to vote "No" in the referendum.

Another prominent Indigenous leader opposing the referendum is Lidia Thorpe, and of course, we have Senator Jacinta Price the Liberal party's spokesperson against the Voice. Just to name a few. Honestly, I don't know why that's an issue unless we fall into stereotyping that all First Peoples think alike.

You and I know that like all races and cultures, the First Peoples are not a homogenous group of people, but very different in many ways. However, each of them believes in their spirituality and cause, they know of the genocidal acts experienced by their ancestors and of the problems faced by the First peoples in a white-dominated society. And they are often discriminated against and stereotyped. Too often we look at them as a single story.

Today we are asked to continue to reflect on the effects of invasion, colonisation and racism on First Peoples. And one tangible way is to learn to see them differently. We need to leave behind the damaging stereotypes we placed on them.

Until and unless we are willing to leave behind our stereotypes of the First Peoples, they would colour our relationships with them.

We must understand the legacy of Australia's history, as it helps to explain the deep sense of injustice felt by the First Peoples, their disadvantaged status today, and their current attitudes towards non-Aboriginal people and society.

Again, the issue of stereotypes – a form of racism often perpetuated through the media – covers a wider range of attitudes than one may expect.

On one hand, there are the attitudes that they are lazy, drunks, un-educated no-hopers, involved in too much crime; that they receive too much from welfare, get treated too leniently by police and courts, and that they do not want to work. On the other hand, there are perceptual stereotypes: if they do not fit the image of a dark-skinned, wide-nosed person then they are not 'real' Aborigines - 'real' Aborigines being full-bloods living a traditional tribal lifestyle.

Both stereotypical attitudes can be very damaging to social, psychological, physical and economic well-being, individually and within the family unit of the indigenous people.

An Australian National Opinion Poll Survey (Mainly Urban) found that the predominant stereotype of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were negative - namely, primitive, nomadic, passive, and lazy.

It found that dual criteria were used by non-Aboriginal people to judge Aboriginality – namely, the darkness of skin and the practice of tribal lifestyles.

Don't forget that the education system also contributes to stereotypes in the wider community. Too often students learn of the negative aspects of Aboriginal history rather than contemporary Aboriginal studies which can be very positive, especially concerning sporting and educational achievements.

Let's circle back to the Book of Ruth.

What has been said about Ruth is of particular importance because Ruth is one of the biblical images that patriarchal church authorities have long held up to Christian women – as a normative expression of who they are or should be and how they should behave.

The emphasis is laid on Ruth's dependence on Boaz and her concomitant delight at and submissive, servile thankfulness for his kindness, reinforces the negative, the male-dependent image that many Christian women have of themselves.

Ruth chapter two verses one and two: *“Now Naomi had a kinsman on her husband's side, a prominent rich man of the family of Elimelech whose name was Boaz. And Ruth the Moabite*

said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field and glean among the ears of grain behind someone in whose sight I may find favour."

Let's be honest, Ruth is very unlike the patriarchal ideal of a woman. Far from being quiet (voiceless), submissive, helplessly dependent and passive, she is brash, active, determined, and independent. She is not a woman – a mere complement to and derivative of man.

In "Woman to Womyn: Countering Patriarchal Stereotypes in the Book of Ruth", Helen Efthimiadis argues that: *"Ruth is liberated, empowered, engendering her own salvation, not relying upon any man to save her. She functions as a deconstructive principle in the patriarchal society in which she lives for, while she works within its confines, she subverts the norms upon which it is based and forces Boaz and "the whole gate" of his people to follow her example. It seems as if patriarchal stereotyping, which defines woman mostly in terms of her biological functions and relation to men as daughter, wife, and mother, has no effect on her and we may rightfully wonder why."*

I am naturally aware that Ruth was probably unfamiliar with such terminology, but I am also highly sensitised to the context in which this book is read as Word of God *today*.

We also notice that she behaves in a completely different way from Naomi, despite facing the same trials (the loss of loved ones to death, childlessness, the stress of displacement and recommitment) and difficulties (marginalisation, possible poverty and lack of protection). She never bemoans her fate, gives in, blames God or becomes inactive.

I believe we must not continue to stereotype Ruth.

As I have mentioned earlier, over the years Ruth has become the postal child of the patriarchal church authorities. She has been long held up to Christian women – as a normative expression of who they are or should be and how they should behave. And we certainly must not view her through the lens of a single story. We need to have the courage to view the story of Ruth from the biblical text, freshly reappraise it and relate to God, ourselves, and each other in a more liberated, meaningful way.

To recover hope for the marginalized, for the oppressed, and those who continue to live under the thrall of patriarchy let's leave behind the danger of a single story.

To give hope to those we often stereotyped.

Let's get close to them and know them as one of us, God's beloved.

Amen.