

Chosen Families

Ruth 1:1-17

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This week we are looking at the story of Ruth. The story of Ruth is a curious one. On the surface it appears to be an origin story about the lineage of King David but was written after the Babylonian Exile. At the end of the book there is an editorial that summarizes King David's lineage making Obed, Ruth's child, King David's great grandfather. That has some merit, but from a spiritual perspective we need to dig a little deeper.

Like most origin stories, scholars believe it was intended to reflect a value or trait about the heritage of King David and God's values of honoring faithfulness of anyone, including a cursed people like the Moabites. The Moabite people were seen as enemies of the children of Israel because they had refused to help the people as they crossed through Moab enroute to the Jordan river centuries earlier. Deuteronomy 23:3-4 commands, "No Ammonite or Moabite shall come into the assembly of the Lord even to the tenth generation. None of their descendants shall come into the assembly of the Lord forever, because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt." Yet here we have a story of a Moabite who becomes part of the Bloodline of King David, defying the idea that Moabites refuse to care for Israelites.

According to Rev. Dr. Anna Grant-Hendersonⁱ, the second reason this is written book was to "show the inclusive nature of Israel's God, Yahweh - it rests on God's grace and simple faith of people." The central verses of this story are revealed in Ruth's vows to Naomi. Ruth is under no legal obligation to remain part of Naomi's family after the death of Ruth's husband, but still she insists. Her words could just as easily be vows at a wedding as she says:

“Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

It is a vow that embodies the depth of God’s faithfulness, even as Naomi has lost faith and hope. Ruth’s unwavering provision becomes a symbol of God’s faithfulness to the people. Ruth begins to rebuild Naomi’s trust and devotion to God by being the love and support she needs. In the story Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem, because they hear that things have changed. Bread and grain are symbols of God’s grace and openness of the people in the story. Yet when they arrive, they are met with suspicion. People are calling Ruth the Moabite woman as they hold onto the old prejudices against her people.

Ruth begins to glean food from a field where she meets Boaz, the owner. He provides protection from harm and allows her to take as much as she needs. He too has heard about Ruth and the good she is doing for Naomi. This is received by Naomi as a sign of God’s provision and her spirits are lifted, hope begins to return, because Boaz is also a relative.

We can relate to this. How often do we need the faithful support of another to help us see God at work in our lives? How often do we experience God’s love through the kindness of others? Especially unlikely people. Ruth has become an unlikely source of God’s grace and provision for Naomi when her family and her people have failed to support her.

Now they have a second chance to not only love and support Naomi and receive this unusual family arrangement. Ruth is Naomi’s family. When Boaz is brought into the picture and asked by Ruth to reclaim Naomi’s heritage and marry Ruth, he agrees. Once again Ruth facilitates a solution for them not only to be provided for, but to carry on the family line through the birth of Obed. They are creating a new family, a chosen family to prosper in. Something unusual happens at the birth of Obed. When it comes

time to bless and name the baby, it is usually given to the father for this rite. But in this story the baby is handed to Naomi, not Boaz and is named by the women of Bethlehem not Boaz. Boaz is not even mentioned in the blessing.

They say, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his (Obed's) name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." (Ruth 4:14-15)

Whenever we read scripture, we can find meaning also for our own lives. One wonderful aspect of these readings today is that they depict loving, caring same sex relations. So, on this Open and Affirming Sunday I want to help you see some of the affirming texts found in scripture that LGBT people point to as examples of God's love and blessing, not condemnation.

Ruth's insistence to remain with Naomi out of choice not obligation speaks to her deep love and care for Naomi. Her oath is akin to wedding vows as she pledges to always be with Naomi, even until death. These women make decisions for their own fate is seen as feminist act of self-determination. Boaz's offer for provision and protection despite the prejudice of the community against the Moabite woman is a sign of inclusion and solidarity. Finally, Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz, inviting him to become part of this chosen family of mutual care and support, outside the conventional structures of their patriarchal society. This is then blessed and affirmed by both the community and God at the birth of Obed.

Our understanding of sexuality has progressed from Biblical times. Yet, we still struggle to lift up positive images in scripture affirming variations of sexuality or relationships still. We heard about the struggles at the CRC this week. We watched the United Methodists struggle with it over the several decades. We remember the past when this church also worked through to become an Open and Affirming congregation. Even within the Unitarian Universalist church this week they heard opposition to full inclusion of Transgender people, so the struggle to feel accepted by others persists. This famine

of love and nurture within our sacred spaces is forcing countless people from their spiritual homes and seek a place of refuge that will feed them.

The heroes of this story are Ruth and Boaz. Ruth became the path from death to new life for Naomi and her family line. Boaz, full of compassion and generosity, created a safe space for Ruth and Naomi to heal and recover. In so doing their chosen family is a healthy and well-fed family built on love.

Yesterday, walking around the Pride festival, I saw plenty of commercial entities seeking to prove how LGBT welcoming they were hoping to gain their business. I also heard evangelists trying to call people to repent, while others used umbrellas and kazoos to drown out their words of hate and judgment. I also saw many booths offering care and support. I took a shift at the blessings' tent to offer words of affirmation, blessing and prayers for healing to all who wanted it. Our intent was to offer spiritual comfort and healing for the many ways faith communities have excluded and condemned the LGBTQIA2S community. I stood there bridging the gap between the church and the wounded person offering love and a listening ear. It was a holy time with many tears, confessions of pain and hugs as I said repeatedly. "You are holy, you are whole, and you are wholly loved without reservation, beyond measure, now and forever more."

So today, as we celebrate our twenty-two years of being an Open and Affirming congregation, let us turn to one another and proclaim again and again. "You are holy, you are whole, and you are wholly loved without reservation, beyond measure, now and forever more." Thanks be to God the source of all love.

ⁱ Rev. Dr. Anna Grant-Henderson - Old Testament Lectionary Blog
Background to the Book of Ruth. From <<https://oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au/index6b41.html?page=book-of-ruth>>