

## “CHOSEN FAMILY”

Ruth 1:1-18

October 31, 2021

Rev. Emily M. Brown

Most people, if they have heard anything from the Book of Ruth at all, encountered a portion of today’s passage in a wedding. It’s a beloved reading that many couples select, and it’s easy to see why. Ruth’s declaration at the end of today’s passage is a beautiful expression of two people joining their lives and hearts as one: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” Indeed, some of my colleagues have noted that people often are surprised when they hear these verses in context. They had assumed that these words were spoken by one spouse to another. In fact, although the sentiment is appropriate for a wedding, the context is something entirely different.

In the Jewish canon, the book of Ruth fits in with the “writings” as opposed to the “Torah” or “Prophets”; you’ll find it after the Song of Songs and before Lamentations. In the Christian order of the Old Testament, we take our cue from the opening words of the book: “In the days when the judges ruled...” and so we put it in the middle of the historical books, just after Judges, because it describes itself as a story that takes place during that time period.

We hear of a great famine in Judah, and that a man took his wife and two sons from Bethlehem to go to live in the country of Moab. Moab is a much-maligned nation in Hebrew scriptures – a perennial enemy, associated with immorality. Many of the names in Ruth are symbolic, and we are supposed to hear the irony of there being a famine in Bethlehem – which is Hebrew for “house of bread.” Surely the famine must have been terrible to make Moab preferable – but still, writing in the Women’s Bible Commentary, Amy-Jill Levine suggests that going to live among the Moabites would be seen as an act of disloyalty. The names of this family are symbolic: the father’s name, Elimelech, means “my God is king.” The wife is named Naomi, which means “pleasant.” The two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, have names meaning “sickness” and “destruction.” In the land of Moab, the two sons marry Moabite women, who are named Orpah

(“back of the neck”) and Ruth (which is a big ambiguous but likely related to the word “companion”).

Soon enough, Elimelech and the two sons die – with names like sickness and destruction, we shouldn’t be too surprised – and Naomi is left widowed and childless in a foreign land. She intends to return to her homeland, but first she speaks to her daughters-in-law. With her sons deceased, the daughters-in-law are no longer obligated to the familial tie that had bound them. She urges them to return to their families, and offers her blessing, but the two daughters-in-law insist that they will stay with her. Again she prevails on them, saying that she has nothing to offer them – no other sons for them to marry. (That’s a reference to a custom of the time called levirate marriage, where if a married man died and had a living brother, that brother would become the husband of the widow. It might seem odd to us now, but it protected widows from destitution, and was a way of carrying on the legacy of the deceased brother.) At this point, Orpah – back-of-the-neck – shows the back of her neck, bidding farewell to Naomi and returning to her people. But Ruth – companion – makes the declaration to Naomi that has been adopted as a popular wedding reading: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

A difficult question within Judaism – then and now and in between – has been the question of intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews. It’s easy for Christians to brush this off as exclusionary, but that’s only because of Christianity’s place in society. There are over 2 billion Christians in the world; nearly every office and shop closes to celebrate our major holidays; religious participation is declining, but there is little worry that Christian traditions will be wiped out or forgotten. In contrast, there are 15 million Jewish people in the world – there are more than a hundred times as many Christians. If that seems hard to believe because Judaism seems so prevalent, that’s because fully 10% of the Jewish people in the world live in the New York Metro area; we here in Hastings live in a region that has a population cluster, which can make it seem as if Judaism and Christianity are equally prevalent, but that isn’t the case at all.

Because they are a relatively small community, the Jewish community has to grapple in a way that we don’t with the question of how to ensure that their traditions and beliefs and history and culture are passed down from generation to generation. The memory and legacy of the Holocaust adds another layer of urgency and loss to these questions. So there is now, and there has always

been, active debate around how to handle marrying outsiders – because when that happens, it becomes less likely that the subsequent generations will carry on the traditions and history, the practices of worship and devotion, the holidays and customs.

In the time when Ruth was written, biblical scholars believe that there was a particularly strong current of sentiment against “foreign wives” – which in the Bible, we see in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which were written around the same time as Ruth. Robert Alter describes Ruth as “a quiet polemic against the opposition... to intermarriage with the surrounding peoples.” He goes on to describe the plot of Ruth as “an argument against the exclusionary policy on foreign wives propagated by Ezra and Nehemiah.” Against the assertion that Israelites can only marry others of the same lineage, the book of Ruth offers a counterpoint: a story of a righteous woman from an enemy nation who declares, “your people shall be my people, and your God my God,” and becomes part of the people of God despite coming from outside the community.

Perhaps you’ve heard the saying “blood is thicker than water.” I’d always taken it to mean that biological familial ties – blood – are more important, stronger, more enduring, than other kinds of relationships. Recently I learned that that understanding is exactly backwards. The saying is a shortening of “the blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.” “Water” in this case refers to familial heritage, while covenants were traditionally associated with blood. The saying actually elevates the relationships we choose via promise and commitment over ties we’re born into.

Ruth chooses covenant: although her husband has died, she decides that she and her mother-in-law are family forever. There’s no judgment here against Orpah – she is free to return to her family. But there is an affirmation of chosen family – that Ruth can choose her bond with Naomi, and that that decision makes her not an outsider and a foreign wife, but part of the people of God.

We’ll hear next week more of what happens with Ruth and Naomi when they return to Judah. But this week, we’re invited to give thanks for the expansiveness of what it can mean to be family, what it can mean to be committed, what it can mean to love. This reading is so popular in weddings because marriage is the most common way for two people who aren’t biologically related to become family to one another. But many of us have other kinds of chosen family – I remember one congregant reporting on the dear friends, now aging, whom he goes to France to

visit with and care for – they became family in spirit, chosen family, decades ago and have been ever since. When I presided at a funeral last week, the family gave me the name of someone who was going to do a reading. “Now how is he related?” I asked. “Oh, no relation,” they said. “Our mom fell in love with his dad after the two of them had both been widowed. We had holidays together for years. His dad passed a while ago, and now mom is gone, but we still think of mom’s boyfriend’s kids as family. So he’s no relation, but we all think of him as a brother.”

Sometimes people feel awkward or strange explaining complicated family or chosen family. That’s understandable. But we are reminded today that scripture celebrates that there are ways to be family that are not as simple as “mother,” “father,” “sister,” “brother,” but no less valid, meaningful, and important. Long after Ruth and Naomi lived, the early followers of Jesus would reflect this truth by calling each other “brother” and “sister” as a reminder that in choosing to follow Christ, we become family to each other.

Thanks be to God for the love that draws us together into families of birth and families by choice, for the love that turns outsiders into insiders and strangers into friends, for the love that makes us brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen.