

A Sermon on Ruth 1:1-8  
The Sunday Before Juneteenth  
Graduation Sunday  
June 18, 2023  
Rev. Anita Peebles, Seattle First Baptist Church

Today we continue our series of uplifting queer biblical stories during Pride month, turning to the book of Ruth, one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman. The first chapter of Ruth contains one of the most well-known and often quoted passages of Scripture. This scripture is often used in wedding ceremonies, as it is a beautiful statement of commitment between two people. For centuries these words have been read to bind couples together in love, and yet many do not realize these words were shared between two women.

As is the case for many queer readings, biblical scholars and theologians have read the text with an eye for relationships that seem unconventional, that are non-normative, that push boundaries of insiders and outsiders. Also important to a question of queer readings of Scripture is the definition of “queer” itself: bell hooks, the Black queer Appalachian teacher and writer said, “Queer’ not as being about who you’re having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but ‘queer’ as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live.”

And scholars and theologians have resonated with the story of Ruth and Naomi precisely because these themes arise: love, commitment, relationships outside of normative society’s boundaries, chosen family over blood family.

Hear this reading from the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Ruth:

“1 In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. 2 The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon[a] and Chilion;[b] they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. 3 But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 4 These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, 5 both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

6 Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. 7 So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. 8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. 9 The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then

she kissed them, and they wept aloud. 10 They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 11 But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? 12 Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, 13 would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me.” 14 Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her.

15 So she said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 16 But Ruth said,

“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.

17 Where you die, I will die,  
and there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!”

18 When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.”  
(Ruth 1:1-18 NRSVUE)

These vows that Ruth said to Naomi take place after the formal social ties of daughter-in-law and mother-in-law were severed by the death of Naomi’s son. Ruth had no obligation to stay with Naomi, and Naomi knew it—and Ruth could have gone the way of Orpah and returned to her homeland and her traditions and her family. But instead, Ruth chooses to continue being family with Naomi, declaring her commitment to be with Naomi for the duration of their lives.

In *Communion: The Female Search for Love*, bell hooks writes, “Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust.” And we certainly see that here in the text, with Ruth declaring that she will take on the land and religion and home of Naomi until her last breath.

Wait, wait, wait: am I saying that Ruth and Naomi were lesbians? That they were in a same-gender romantic and maybe sexual relationship together? Maybe! The text does not go as far as to tell us those dimensions of their intimacy. Perhaps the author who wrote down this short story of part of the lineage of King David was not very interested in women’s shared love. We don’t

know, we don't have that information, and we also must admit that our understandings of sexuality differ greatly from those a few thousand years ago.

What we do know is there are some interesting linguistic similarities between the story of Ruth and Naomi and heterosexual couples. For example, Kittredge Cherry, a lesbian Christian theologian, writes, "The same Hebrew word (dabaq) is used to describe Adam's feelings for Eve and Ruth's feelings for Naomi. In Genesis 2:24 it says, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh." The way that Adam "cleaved" to Eve is the way that Ruth "clung" to Naomi. Countless couples have validated this interpretation by using their vows as a model for how spouses should love each other..."<sup>1</sup>

And beyond academic scholarship parsing out ancient language and grammar, we also know that queer people, and lesbians and bisexual women in particular, have found meaning in this story, have recognized themselves...and that is worth paying attention to.

Writing an article for the Jewish Women's Archive entitled, "*Wherever You Go, I Go*": *Queerness in the Book of Ruth*, Elana Spivack says,

"If mapping queerness onto the story doesn't convince you, look at the existing elements, which heighten queer ties and themes. For example, Ruth and Naomi have the rare opportunity to make their own decisions, not tethered to any husband or master. They've also lost the status of "mother/daughter-in-law," as both Naomi's and Ruth's husbands have died. These two women are not legally beholden to each other, and yet they choose to remain together. Ruth's proclamation makes it seem as though this choice to stay together is out of need—albeit emotional, not lawful—rather than want.

The companionship these two biblical women display is in itself is remarkable. Queerness is not always just about one's sexual or romantic inclinations, but also one's status in relation to a group, or one's unorthodox tendencies, exemplified by one's behaviors or the company one keeps. This story is queer without Ruth and Naomi having to express sexual or romantic attraction to each other, [as one scholar, Preser] explains: "The Book of Ruth does not detail the relationship between Ruth and Naomi; it simply presents us with an exceptional story of devotion...Cautious not to apply an anachronistic conception of lesbianism to the text, queer scholars seem to agree that the Ruth–Naomi dyad offers a powerful biblical example of same-sex intimacy." The very existence of Ruth and Naomi's intimate relationship in the Bible, a thousands-of-years-old text, is significant and radical."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://qspirit.net/ruth-naomi-loved-each-other/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://jwa.org/blog/wherever-you-go-i-go-queerness-book-ruth>

Worth noting is that the book of Ruth is the only book of the Bible that passes the Bechdel test—you may be familiar with this, it's a test for representation of fully-formed female characters in media that explores whether female characters talk to each other for a length of time about something other than men. That the book of Ruth is the only place in the Bible where this is the case is something to ponder.

If you are familiar with the book of Ruth, or perhaps you will revisit the book again after this service, you may be wondering how the plot of the rest of the book impact the case for queerness: how does Naomi's plan for Ruth to be impregnated by her kinsman Boaz and then marry him play into ideas of love, sexuality and women's intimacy?

Marriage in the Bible was not often about the love two people shared—it was usually a political arrangement, one made to protect property or lineage, or to fulfill covenants with the Holy. Women in particular did not have much autonomy in the ancient world, and so it is understandable that marriage was one way women could secure physical and political protection. This is part of how marriage functions in the story of Ruth—Boaz recognized the vulnerable situation of Ruth and Naomi, and he told other men nearby not to bother them; he also provided a way for them to get food, allowing Ruth to glean in his fields. Men often functioned as protectors of women in the ancient world. And part of Naomi's hope was that her family lineage would be carried on—but her sons were gone and she was too old to marry and produce an heir. An interesting practice that we read about several places in the Hebrew Scriptures comes up in the book of Ruth: Levirate marriage. Levirate marriage allowed for a man from the deceased man's family to impregnate the deceased man's wife, then the child (if male) would be considered the deceased's heir; this would essentially safeguard a family line to continue. (A fun fact for a further sermon is that there are some scholars, including one of my college religion professors, Dr. Cindy Chapman, who proposed that spiritual and cultural lineage was passed on via breastmilk, and that's why after Ruth gave birth to Obed, his grandmother Naomi nursed him—his Hebrew grandmother instead of his Moabite mother, who had left her own people in favor of joining the house of Israel).

At some point, it doesn't matter if there were actually historical people named Ruth and Naomi who were in a same-gender-loving relationship back in the days before King David, nearly three thousand years ago. And at some point, it doesn't matter if the author of the text meant for there to be queer overtones in this text. What matters the most, today, is that LGBTQIA+ Jewish folks and Christians see themselves in the story of Ruth and Naomi—they see the dedication, the love, the care. They see the choice to live outside the norms of society. They see how Ruth created a chosen family. They see how Ruth and Naomi had to cleverly and strategically work in and through and around cultural expectations to secure their protection, safety, and lineage of God's people. Real people, perhaps some or many here in this place, read the story of Ruth and Naomi and they say, "Oh! I am not alone. My love is good and valid and sacred. We have been here for a long time." And that is good.

Because in these days of Pride, it is important to remind each other that we are not alone—you are not alone. When you live outside of the normative story someone else wants to tell about you—you are not alone. When you love someone that others don't think you should love—you are

not alone. When you are creating chosen family because blood relationships are not giving you the care and love and space you need to be wholly yourself—you are not alone.

Beloved church, what is a church family but a chosen family? What are we doing here in this place together, but trying to love each other well and show up for each other and strengthen our bonds to one another by saying, “where you go, I will go”?

Queer love has been around since the beginning of love, and it has been sacred and important that whole time. And it is today. Queer love is in our Scripture, showing up hidden in plain sight, encouraging those who see themselves reflected in the gaze of a queerly beloved God. Thanks be to God!