**Families of Choice**

Ruth 4:13-17

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Before I read today’s scripture passage, let me set the context a little, as we don’t often get to the Book of Ruth. This story comes from the Hebrew Scriptures, what Christian’s traditionally called the Old Testament. It is set about 1100 years before Jesus in a period of Hebrew life before the establishment of the Jewish kingdom.

Ruth herself is not a Hebrew. She is a Moabite. Moab was a territory to the east of Israel in what is modern day Jordan. The Moabites were distant cousins of the Hebrews, and they were often at conflict with one another. Though they don’t appear to be at the time of this story. One of the great beauties of the Hebrew Scriptures is this story about a woman from a disliked people who herself becomes an ancestor of the great King David. The inclusion of this story in the sacred story of the Hebrews demonstrates a universalizing and welcoming tendency.

Naomi and her husband are originally from Bethlehem. They moved to Moab during a period of famine and while living there, their sons married local women. Eventually Naomi’s husband and her sons die, so she decided to return to Bethlehem, to her hometown and her people. And Ruth decides to go with her. Of course the custom would have been for Ruth to return to her own family of origin, but she chooses to go with Naomi. Her commitment is recorded in these beautiful words, “Do not press me to leave you or 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.” Those words are often read at marriage ceremonies, though I assume most people don’t realize that it is a covenant being made between two women.

So, Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem where Ruth sets about providing for the two of them. And in a patriarchal society, that means finding a husband and producing sons. Ruth is wily and creative in achieving this goal. That’s where we pick up the story in today’s reading. Hear now this story from the Book of Ruth.

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Did you notice that when the child is born that he is declared to be Naomi’s son? Though he is in fact of no direct blood or genetic relation to Naomi?

Today I want to use this ancient story to generate a contemporary reflection on family. This summer I’m preaching a series entitled “The Work of Love,” and we’ve already talked some about friendship and marriage, as we are exploring what contemporary, progressive Christians have to say about our various love relationships. Today we explore some aspects of family.

The family has become a battlefield in the American culture wars of the last few decades. We used to hear a lot about “family values” in our political debates, though we don’t hear that as much anymore. Though in the debates over marriage equality for same-sex couples you do hear a lot about family, about procreation and children. One side says that same-sex marriage will harm children and families, while the other side points out that there is no empirical evidence for that claim and it has been rejected by every court which has heard the argument. Instead, those of us in favour of marriage equality raise the issue of the children being raised by gay and lesbian couples and how they deserve the legal protections that come with state and federal recognition. This is just the latest battle over the family, which in recent decades has also included debates over divorce, single parents, fertility treatments and surrogacy. And even some other topics such as the immigration and health care debates connect with family issues.

Religious conservatives often promote a vision of the family based upon idealized notions of American life in the 1950’s. A dad who worked and made enough to support a middle class lifestyle. A Mom who stayed home and cleaned the house in high heels and pearls. And 2.8 kids who never rebelled, never did drugs, and waited to have sex until they were married. If families were ever like this, it was an historical anomaly. Instead of the nuclear family, most families throughout history have been much larger networks of kinship, often including elderly parents or aunts and uncles and many branches of a family under one roof. Even the blended families of step and half siblings which seemed to be a new feature of the 1970’s wasn’t new. We’ve learned as my mother has explored our family’s genealogy that most of our ancestors in the 18th and 19th centuries were married two or three times as spouses died from war, disease, and childbirth. Mom has sometimes had difficulty tracing which children in a household were produced by which marriage.

Yet, many contemporary religious conservatives want us to believe that the nuclear family—that 1950’s American image—is ordained by God and established in the Bible. One could even say that they’ve made an idol of this idea. It doesn’t take a very close reading of scripture to debunk the idea, as even today’s story demonstrates. There are many different types of families in the bible, with polygamous ones being dominant in the oldest stories.

Jesus himself was not a family man. In the Gospels there are stories of him rejecting his own family, who originally seem to be embarrassed by him. At one point his mother and siblings come to him, and he refuses to see them, claiming instead that his followers are his real family.

Scholar Dale Martin points out that Jesus rejected the family and household structures of his time, finding them to be patriarchal institutions of control. Instead, Jesus wanted to liberate people to a more authentic existence, so he encouraged forming new relationships not based on family. This, of course, ultimately gave birth to the church.

Paul rejected family and marriage as well, encouraging early Christians that their commitment to the church and its mission were the most important relationships in their life. Family should come second. Yet, some of Paul’s own followers were uncomfortable with this notion, so they reasserted the role of the family, which is why some of the letters that appear under Paul’s name, yet which scholars believe weren’t written by Paul, encourage the submission of wives to their husbands.

Despite this attempt to promote the family, it didn’t catch on in the early church, because for most of Christian history the church was not pro-family. Instead, it promoted celibacy as the highest form of Christian life. It was around a thousand years into Christian history before anyone developed a marriage ceremony for the church. This emphasis began to change in the Reformation but it was ultimately our own United Church of Christ ancestors, the Puritans, who radically altered 1500 years of Christian teaching and placed the family and the household at the center of the Christian life. There are positive aspects to this revolution, as it promoted the care of children, valued of sex in marriage (which Christianity had often looked down on), and viewed the home as the central place for religious education and development. It is no surprise, then, that our ancestors were the ones who encouraged the family bible. The family bible became the place where you recorded marriages, births, baptisms, and deaths, keeping all the records together in this sacred treasure.

But the downside of promoting the family is that patriarchy and hierarchy were promoted as well and the good ideas our religious tradition gave birth to have resulted in the Christian conservative views on family that we encounter today.

My good friend and colleague the Rev. Michael Piazza has written that this idea of the traditional American family “has proven woefully inadequate and dysfunctional for most of us.” Having spent most of his ministry pastoring LGBT persons, he has learned how damaging our families of origin can be. For instance, he tells the story of Robbie, a seventeen year old homeless boy who once came to the Cathedral of Hope. As Michael spoke with him, he learned that Robbie had been on the streets since he was fourteen years old. Robbie had confided in his youth minister that he was struggling with feelings for a boy at school. The next Sunday Robbie was horrified when the pastor of the church called him out by name and “launched into a tirade” about homosexuality. Two days later, on his fourteenth birthday, Robbie came home from school to find a suitcase on the front step packed with his clothes and belongings and the locks on the doors changed.

This is, of course, an extreme example, but many of us, maybe all of us, have experienced ways in which our families of origin can be wounding. For instance, I am currently estranged from my own sister and much of my extended family.

In my own ministry I have often counseled people dealing with hurtful family members. My advice to them is that just because you are related to someone it does not give them the right to hurt you. You can set the terms of your relationship. You can tell someone that you won’t let them talk to you in a certain way or treat you in a certain way. You may even set the rule that certain topics are off-limits. But you must be prepared for that person to reject your standards, and if they do, the healthy response is to minimize your relationship with that person. You are not obligated to spend time with people who hurt you.

But can the family be redeemed? I think it can. Michael Piazza wrote, “The ideal family which God dreams of for each of us is made up of individuals who know us and love us as we are, not as they wish us to be.”

This is one area where I think the LGBT community has learned some lessons that are helpful for the wider culture. The families that gays and lesbians create are quite often built on mutuality because they do not inherit the patriarchal stereotypes that define traditional gender roles. And because many gays and lesbians spent decades isolated from their families of origin they instead developed “families of choice.” These are made up of the people who encourage and support you and do the things that family should do. If you are lucky, your family of choice will include some of your family of origin, but it will also be made up of friends, neighbors, church members, mentors, and the other people important in your life.

Michael Piazza is clear, however, that developing a family of choice takes some work and intention. These close relationships don’t occur naturally or haphazardly. Plus, he thinks that we need to be intentional about including diversity in our families of choice—people of different backgrounds, different ages, and different abilities.

He gives a vivid description of this type of family:

All of us should . . . create the family that we would want to help us make that final transition when it is our time to die. We all need a family who understands if we throw up on them, a family . . . we are not embarrassed to wear those hospital gowns around. Our family should be people we can tell how cute we thought that nurse was, people we can tell how afraid we really are. That is the kind of family God dreams of for us because a family like that with whom we can be real in death, will also be there for us in this life.

The modern family, then, is built around respect, mutuality, and care instead of our blood or our genes.

Is there any biblical warrant for this idea of family? I think there is. As I said before, Jesus rejected traditional notions of family and instead identified his band of disciples as his really family. And this story from the Book of Ruth is about a family of choice. Ruth chose to remain family with Naomi even to the point of allowing Naomi to treat Ruth’s son as her own.

Let us, therefore, embrace the liberating gospel message that family is supposed to be made up of the people that love us unconditionally just the way we are. This is the family that God dreams us for us.