



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Family Matters
Part 3
All shapes and sizes

Ruth 1.6–18

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CHOSEN FAMILIES

1

Families are often building blocks in the Biblical narrative—the setting in which God’s presence is real, and action unfolds. As I mentioned two weeks ago, in the Biblical story, we see families and family systems galore. We looked at Mary and Martha’s differing personalities and how that lead to friction in their relationship. Last week, Pastor Jason shared about his changing family and the addition of a member to it.

But let’s spend a little more time thinking about what a family is. What makes a family?

Charles Dickens said that “Family not only need to consist of merely those whom we share blood, but also for those whom we’d give blood.”

It’s good to note in this series on families that while often families are those with whom we share blood, there are also other families that we are part of. We have a church family. At our best we think about humankind as our great global family. And to Dickens’ point there are other families.

A phrase that has become common is “**chosen family**.” A chosen family is a group of individuals who chose to play significant roles in one another’s lives even though they may not be legally or biologically related. Love and commitment make these families. This is not a new concept. People have built **chosen families** since the beginning of time. These are families that we construct by hand and heart, in an effort to give and receive support and love, sometimes because someone’s biological or legal family might not be able to—or even refuse—to provide that support and love.

In Dickens’ the chosen families were often made up of orphans. For Jesus, it was the sinners and beggars and prostitutes and mentally and physically ill. Jesus brought these families together.

2

FAMILY IN THE BIBLE

But somehow modern Christianity has gotten all tangled up in trying to define precisely what a family should look like, especially around issues of marriage. But we have to exercise caution when looking to the Bible for a rock solid definition of what a family looks like.

Does it look like the Bible's first family, Adam, Eve, two brothers and a murder? Maybe it looks like Abraham's family? After all, Abraham is often thought of as the patriarch of both the Jewish and Arab peoples. His family started as a husband and a wife (Abram and Sarai), (actually it started as a half-brother and half-sister who became husband and wife), but when no children were being born it became a husband, a wife and their slave, Hagar, who Abraham forced himself upon, which did give him the son he was looking for, Ishmael. Then it became a husband, a slave who bore a son, Ishmael, and a wife who then also bore a son, Isaac.

Then after Sarah died, Abraham is recorded as being "remarried" to Keturah and had six more sons. I use quotes for "remarried" due to the fact that in Genesis Keturah is referred to as another wife while in First Chronicles she's known as Abraham's concubine.

So remind me of the Biblical version of marriage and family again? Neither of these examples are what we would imagine today as healthy families. As always, we have to use caution when applying the Biblical story.

FAITHFUL FAMILIES COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

I think we would all use different Biblical standards than Abraham's to describe healthy marriages and families. Characteristics like love, commitment, self-sacrifice. In families, we have the ability and blessing to be places of love and commitment, a harbor in the storms of life. And of

course that can happen even when families don't fit the conventional mold. It's not a husband, a wife, 1.8 kids, a golden retriever and white picket fence that makes a family. It is love and devotion and understanding and empathy and so much more.

In today's scripture we see a family that embodied these traits and lived through extreme crises because they had one another, and were faithful to one another. NOTE: this family is not celebrated and recorded in the Biblical annals because it looked like the stereotypically idyllic family, for that time or for this time. This family is recorded in the bible and celebrated because they loved one another, were committed to one another and expressed that love and commitment even to the point of self-sacrifice.

RUTH 1.6–18

One day she got herself together, she and her two daughters-in-law, to leave the country of Moab and set out for home; she had heard that God had been pleased to visit his people and give them food. And so she started out from the place she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law with her, on the road back to the land of Judah.

After a short while on the road, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, "Go back. Go home and live with your mothers. And may God treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. May God give each of you a new home and a new husband!" She kissed them and they cried openly.

They said, "No, we're going on with you to your people."

But Naomi was firm: "Go back, my dear daughters. Why would you come with me? Do you suppose I still have sons in my womb who can become your future husbands? Go back, dear daughters—on your way, please! I'm too old to get a husband. Why, even if I said, 'There's still hope!' and this very night got a man

4 *and had sons, can you imagine being satisfied to wait until they were grown? Would you wait that long to get married again? No, dear daughters; this is a bitter pill for me to swallow—more bitter for me than for you. God has dealt me a hard blow.”*

Again they cried openly. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye; but Ruth embraced her and held on.

Naomi said, “Look, your sister-in-law is going back home to live with her own people and gods; go with her.”

But Ruth said, “Don’t force me to leave you; don’t make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I’ll live. Your people are my people, your God is my God; where you die, I’ll die, and that’s where I’ll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!”

When Naomi saw that Ruth had her heart set on going with her, she gave in. And so the two of them traveled on together to Bethlehem.

When they arrived in Bethlehem the whole town was soon buzzing:

FAMILIES COME IN MANY SHAPES AND SIZES

If you’re not familiar with the Book of Ruth, you should read it. It’s not all that long, and it’s a wonderful narrative (almost parable) about families and faithfulness that also prompts us to think about our commitment to the entire human family. The plot is centered around an atypical familial relationship between a mother and daughter-in-law, Naomi and Ruth.

In the Book of Ruth—like in real life—we see that families come in many shapes and sizes. But it also reflects on the relationships between spouses and those soon-to-be married, children and parents, and extended communities

of kinfolk that can all be life-giving. In the Book of Ruth, though all of these family configurations are struck by horrendous events and losses, they remain strong and true to one another.

To refresh your memory, the Book of Ruth in brief:

In the time of the book of Judges, an awful time in which God's people constantly "do evil in God's sight", Naomi, her husband, and their two sons move to a different land to escape famine. Sadly, Naomi's husband dies. The two sons marry women from that foreign land, Orpah and Naomi. Then the two sons die! Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to return to their families to find sustenance and security. Orpah goes reluctantly. But Naomi refuses to leave Ruth launching one of the most beautiful texts in the Bible: *Where you will go I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall become my people, and your God will be my God; where you die I will die.* (Ruth 1:16)

So Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem where they get the only work they can, gleaning the fields. Naomi advises Ruth how to stay safe in a place and time where a single woman was a target. Ruth gains the eye and the favor of the field owner, Boaz, partially because he sees her unwavering dedication to Naomi. In the end, it turns out to be a match made in inheritance heaven because Boaz is a relative of Ruth's first husband and he had behaved honorably in an earlier episode. You'll have to read the rest to get that part.

If you didn't catch every detail that's okay because the bottom line is this: Naomi, Ruth and Boaz all remained devoted to their families, even families that were not blood. Families to which they had no official or traditional duty. It would have been easier to not be devoted. And they acted in love, commitment and selflessness, even in an era that

6 was beset by death, and famine and hardship. Now that's a family.

These honorable actions are a big deal because of their merit. But they are an even bigger deal in the Bible. You see, the book of Ruth comes right after the Book of Judges. If you are ever yearning for some intense, violent, lawless, everyone-for-themselves excess, along with religious and moral degeneracy, you don't have to go to the movies or watch TV. Judges is the book for you. In the Book of Judges chaos and vengeance and violence reign when people turn away from God and rely solely upon themselves.

The Book of Ruth is the rebuttal and counterpoint to the Book of Judges. In Ruth, the theme of *chesed* rules supreme as lived by Ruth and Naomi. *Chesed* is the Hebrew word for loving-kindness. *Chesed* is rooted in loyalty and commitment to one another. Rather than living by one's own whims and standards, one lives by God's standards. Part of that standard is being faithful and devoted to family so that family can be both an anchor and a platform for expressing loving-kindness to the world more broadly. (And just so there's no confusion, faithfulness and devotion to one's family does not mean covering their inadequacies or sins, especially if they are hurting someone.) In families, *chesed*, loving-kindness, rules supreme. In Ruth we see that standard lived in a marvelous and live-giving way.

IS THIS A FAMILY?

And so, Biblically, according to the Book of Ruth, what makes a family? It's not the gender allotment of parents in the family. Or the number of children or children at all. Not even a blood connection. It is love, commitment, self-sacrifice and so much more.

