

Chapter 9 The Path
Book of Ruth
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Family, Faithfulness, and Inclusion

There was one 2-for-1 Thanksgiving holiday sale that really tempted me. And even though I missed it, I'm still seriously thinking about purchasing one of those DNA ancestry kits at some point. I love the idea of seeing how my DNA matches up to the family lore, the stories I heard from parents and grandparents about my ancestors. I've been told some were immigrants from the British Isles and France, arriving on this continent prior to the American Revolution. And there are others who arrived in the late 19th century as religious refugees, when pogroms drove them out of Eastern Russia. And there must be others out there who also find the idea of learning about family ancestry pretty fascinating, as there's still plenty of advertising on different kinds of kits for the Christmas season.

But historically, not everyone has been open, much less flexible, about ancestry. There's typically been a hierarchy — whether social, political, or religious — about what's considered the right background, the right beliefs, the right kind of person to marry. Those who are worthy to become part of the family tree. And there have been strong opposing opinions on which is better: an exclusive versus inclusive view on what's best.

And that question about ancestry, about who's in and who's out, is part of the backstory behind the book of Ruth covered in Chapter 9 of The Path, the Bible summary we're reading together this year as a parish. The book of Ruth is thought to have been written after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile. Part of its context is the ongoing religious debate about ancestry that took place in those times, and whether marriages to non-Jews could be allowed. Inclusion or exclusion. Mixed or pure. And if you want to get a quick snapshot of the alternative Old Testament point of view, check out the books of Nehemiah and Ezra which we'll be touching on in Chapter 15 of the Path in February.

The book of Ruth tells us about a family who left Bethlehem during a time of famine and emigrated to Moab. And according to cultural norms, Moab is NOT where the people of Israel should choose to live. It's considered a nation that is not right with God and, according to Jewish tradition, was filled with a people who are seen as self-centered, particularly since they don't seem to follow the law's requirements for hospitality or kindness. Moabites are unwelcome in the congregation of God. Yet this Jewish family settles in Moab and the two sons marry foreign women. Ten years go by, and the father and his two sons die, leaving Naomi, the mother and her two childless, non-Jewish daughters-in-law to fend for themselves during a patriarchal time when it could reasonably be considered a death-sentence to not have the protection of a man.

Naomi encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their families and begin their lives again, for there are no good prospects for them if they remain together. But Ruth chooses to stay. She chooses to stay with Naomi and return with her to Bethlehem. And so the story continues: a story of family, faithfulness, and inclusion.

We learn in this story that family ties that go far beyond blood lines, for Ruth, a Moabite, not only remains with Naomi, but diligently cares for her, as if Ruth was her own child. Ruth is present for Naomi in her grief and mourning, takes responsibility for Naomi's well-being as she gleaned their sustenance from the fields, and later risks her reputation as she seeks out Boaz in the threshing room and asks for him to care of her.

Ruth's actions are inspired by deep love, respect, and kindness towards Naomi. This story pushes us to expand our definition of family as we gaze through eyes illuminated by the light of compassionate kindness, loyalty, and love, helping us to see beyond the limits of rules and boundaries established by the world. I wonder — would we interact with others differently, if we really saw one another as family, joined together as God's own?

The Book of Ruth also teaches us about faithfulness, both human and Divine. Our three main characters, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, are all exemplars of faithful living. Ruth is faithful in her love and care of Naomi. Naomi rises from her anguish and grief to faithfully care for Ruth. Boaz faithfully protects Ruth from harassment as she harvests from his fields, he is generous in providing Ruth and Naomi with extra grain, and he later marries Ruth, insuring that both women are cared for throughout their lives.

And although God not specifically mentioned, God is behind the scenes and God too is faithful, consistently caring for them all. Naomi and Ruth, women alone, find their way safely back to Bethlehem. Ruth miraculously finds her way to a relative's field — Boaz's field — where she gleanes the grain she and Naomi need to survive. And Boaz mysteriously takes notice of Ruth, recognizing her loyalty, goodness, and worthiness, seeing beyond her label as an outsider, a Moabite.

Some say that a coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous. It's God's hand, God's providence, that leads to the union of Ruth and Boaz, and the blessing to their marriage of a child. What is in our lives, right in front of us, for us to see? What blessings would we notice, if we began to look at coincidences differently, opening ourselves to seeing God's hand touching our day-to-day lives?

And finally, this story of Ruth teaches us to lean into the wondrous possibilities of inclusion, for the the son of Ruth and Boaz is Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of King David. Ruth's Moabite label does not describe all that she is, for in the last chapter of the book, Ruth is compared to the great matriarchs of the Old Testament. Like Rachel and Leah, who built the nation of Israel through the birth and raising of the Twelve Tribes; like Tamar, the mother of Perez, borne of Judah; Ruth too is a woman of worth. David, the most famous of Israel's kings descends from Ruth, the Moabite, and this royal line will lead, in later generations, to the birth of the Messiah, our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

This book gives us a glimpse of the possibilities of *xenophilia*, the love of foreigners, of strangers, rather than *xenophobia*, the fear. Just as a DNA test may tell us surprising truths of our own ancestry, this book may surprise us with the truth of Jesus' ancestry: an ancestry that includes the the homeless, the stranger, and the oppressed.

This lesson teaches that family is more than bloodlines; that inclusion can lead to flourishing and fullness; and faithfulness to God can be lived out in our own day-to-day lives by demonstrating love, compassionate caring, and kindness towards one another. This story also gives us the chance to recognize the promise of God's eternal love, for God's overflowing faithfulness not only affects the lives of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz so long ago, but the lives of all God's people, through the ancestry leading to the birth of Jesus.

So as we begin this season of Advent, and prepare ourselves for the coming of our Savior, I encourage you to strive to see through Jesus' eyes. Take the time to see the humanity of those you encounter. Recognize the *belovedness* of all of God's creation. We can live into Christ's compassionate caring and love by welcoming all with intentionality and especially by showing

hospitality to those who are excluded or *othered*, for that is where we can find the blessings of abundant life: blessing upon blessing, until we are filled to overflowing. Thanks be to God.