

“Lessons from an Ancient, Modern Family”

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Text: Ruth 1: 1 - 22

Rev. Peter Coutts

I grew up in the age of television, and television shows mirrored what our culture thought about family life. As the years went by so the shows came and went, but they still modeled an ideal sense of family life: “Leave it to Beaver”, “Little House on the Prairie”, “The Bill Cosby Show”, “Happy Days”. TV portrayals of the family took a sharp turn in 1987 which scandalized many with the arrival of The Simpsons. How do you spell “dysfunction”? Much of the railing against this show was, in part, because people didn’t understand the nature of satire. But it was also because didn’t deeply appreciate how much the family had been changing. Now, 30 years later, it’s beyond question. Families on TV today are depicted with great diversity. At its best it helps us appreciate the modern realities families face. At their worst – like the Lannister family on Game of Thrones – TV can depict families as train wrecks. And like train wrecks many people feel compelled to watch.

A naïve nostalgia might lead one to assume that the families of the Bible were of the Ozzie and Harriet kind. Actually there are not that many detailed depictions of families in the Bible. And many of the ones we find are marked by dysfunction. The first nuclear family – Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel – saw one brother kill another. After years of waiting for a promised son Abraham was willing to sacrifice Isaac in order to honour God. Jacob’s sons sold their youngest brother into slavery. And that’s just the first book of the Bible. Perhaps not the best models of how to be family!

Yet there are also remarkable stories about families, like the one we read about today. This ancient family, a story perhaps 3,200 years ago, sounds so contemporary in its situation. They were ex-pat Israelites living in Moab. Naomi’s two sons had inter-racial and inter-religious marriages. Naomi’s husband died, as did her two sons, leaving her in this blended family of herself and two daughters-in-law. Add to this the strain that all three were now destitute since they no longer had husbands. Given the tragic turn of events for these women it is no wonder that Naomi would despair in her situation, saying “the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me”. Life had turned tough. And life can be tough in similar ways for families today. Divorce. Remarriage. Making two families one. Huge mortgages that require both parents to work, whether that’s the priority or not. Children facing challenges in their education. Parents trying to be a balancing force to the societal issues our children face. Hoping to instill faith in a land where religion grows in its unimportance. This Biblical story cuts close to the stories of so many here and now. But this family in our story survived, and in many ways actually thrived, because of a set of values they took as important.

So, what to do? In those days the extended family was the welfare system. Naomi saw she had only one choice for herself: return to Bethlehem in Judah. Perhaps... perhaps, maybe, her extended family would take care of her. As for her two daughters-in-law, there was only one practical choice for them as well. Naomi had no more sons who could assume the welfare of these young widows by marrying them, so they too had to return to their own families. But Ruth gave Naomi the most unexpected answer: "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" (1.16). Ruth was determined to go with Naomi. But to go with Naomi to Judah was a huge risk for Ruth. She would now be a foreigner, in a land with a different religion. She would have no husband or family to care for her. She would be poor. BUT... when she looked at Naomi, Ruth saw someone who needed help. And even though the customs of the day said she could walk away, she didn't. She felt committed to Naomi. And here she promised to stay committed to Naomi. "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I too will be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well".

Commitment is the glue that holds families together in adversity. In my London congregation there was a teen who was in trouble with the law regularly. His parents were always there for him, always worked with him to get him back on the straight and narrow. But he never learned and time after time he disappointed his parents. Even after the son did a stretch in Juvenile Detention the family started fresh, again. About 15 years ago I was asked to provide pastoral support a Ghanaian family. There was a young single mum dying in hospital. The question was, who would take care of her 10 year old daughter. The father didn't want to. The girl's grandmother didn't want to, because that would mean returning this 10 year old to Africa and losing her opportunity to grow up in Canada. Then a cousin, who did not know this girl well, flew into Calgary from Toronto and said "I will" without a second thought. In those two words he was committing to raising a teenager who was not his own. But family is family. Commitment. Naomi was facing a desperate future. The daughter-in-law Ruth, in her commitment, was saying "you do not have to face this alone".

For Ruth I think there was a second value that was tied closely to her commitment: compassion. Naomi knew there was little hope that she could ever marry again, and it was uncertain whether her family in Bethlehem would help her or not. As the story unfolds it looks like they didn't. Naomi called herself old, and it seems from the details of the story that her age put her beyond helping herself. Ruth saw that, and her heart reached out to Naomi. So Ruth – with only Naomi to call family – did what she could. It was Jewish law that landowners had to allow the poor to come onto their fields, after the harvest had been taken in, so the poor might find and keep crops left behind. It's a practice called gleaning. This is how Ruth got the two of them by, through survival. At nightfall Ruth would return to Naomi with whatever she had gathered in the fields and shared it with her. Compassion. Compassion is the inclination to be merciful. It is an expression of love.

Over my 32 years of ministry I have witnessed many acts of compassion happening in families. Older couples moving across the country to support their married children by providing childcare. Grown children leaving the workforce to care for an ailing parent. An extended family sharing responsibility for raising a special needs child. We live in an age of independence and in a society where we assume the social welfare net will take care of any challenge. Yet even so, we all stumble upon stories of families who go the extra mile (and more) for a family member out of compassion.

As our continues, we see other values come to the fore. The man who owned the field saw this stranger gleaning, and he asked “who is that young woman?” His name was Boaz. When he learned that it was Ruth, he thought “Oh, I’ve heard of her”. He was a distant relative of Naomi. He told his people to watch over her, keep her safe, leave some extra crops behind for her to gather. He shared with her food and water. Ruth was taken aback by his kindness, and asked, “Why are you doing this for me?” He answered, “I’ve heard what you are doing for my kinwoman Naomi”. Respect, another value that holds families together. In time Boaz decided to help Ruth become more secure by arranging for a near relative to become her husband. “but if he cannot fulfill that responsibility” Boaz said, “I will do it.” Here we see the value of loyalty, and we see honour as well. Honour is about doing what is right. In those days ensuring Ruth got remarried was the right thing to do.

Respect, loyalty, honour: they play such critical roles in family life. There was a young girl who heard about a breast cancer fundraiser which ended with having her hair all shaved off. She wanted to do it! Her mother thought it was cute, and she thought her daughter was most captivated by the coolness of being bald for a while. But in the following weeks the mother’s impression changed. Her daughter was showing a great commitment to the fundraising, and the pledges she got grew substantially as week followed week. Her mother had not seen at first that it was really as much, or more, about fighting cancer. Week after week she grew more proud of her daughter. Then, a couple of days before the hair-raising experience, the daughter asked her mother “will you get your head shaved too?” Mum was taken aback by the request, and her first thought was “how about I make a big donation instead?” But over the weeks her respect for her daughter had grown in her worthy project. The situation called honour into question: what is the right thing and should I do it? And that question was answered by loyalty: the need to stand by her daughter in this. The mum had her hair cut off too. Hair grows back. But what also grows in a family where respect, honour and loyalty are expressed? Family bonds. In the end Boaz married Ruth out of respect (for the care Ruth gave to Naomi), honour (doing what was right) and loyalty (to the family).

The story of Ruth is a lovely story, but why include it in scripture? In part because Ruth and Boaz in time would be the great grandparents of King David. But I think it was also included because the story

exemplifies what families were called to do in that time and place...and the values families are called to express regardless of time and place. A few times in this brief book we hear its characters ask God to bless the people who expressed these values. We read, "May Boaz be blessed for his compassion", "May Ruth be blessed for her loyalty." These are prayers...prayers that ask God to come alongside people who are trying to do the right thing in the face of challenges. May God bless all families represented here this day as well all seek to express these values and more.