

**Sermon - 26 May 2019**  
**First UCC Sermon Series, On Relationships: Family**  
**Lauren Baske Davis**

**Ruth 1:8-18**

<sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>They said to her, 'No, we will return with you to your people.' <sup>11</sup>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? <sup>12</sup>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, <sup>13</sup>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.' <sup>14</sup>Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. <sup>15</sup> So she said, 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.' <sup>16</sup>But Ruth said, '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. <sup>17</sup> Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!' <sup>18</sup>When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

**John 19:25-27**

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.

**Sermon**

As we continue our sermon series, On Relationships, the closer it got to this Sunday, the more nervous I became. Knowing I'd be preaching on *family* relationships, a few things happened. First, I envisioned the art that hung in my friends' son's nursery years ago. It had the words "love makes a family," and was an image of a bird, a duck, a hedgehog and a rabbit together. But simultaneously, I also was hearing in my head the warnings of seminary professors and pastoral care advisors, saying, "Whatever you do, *don't* preach on the church as a family! Think about what that means! Think about family systems Think about how you have no idea what is going on in each persons' family, or family of origin. Think about how it's dangerous to make family a normative image for people because you just don't know what people's experiences of family have been!"

And as I sat down to write, it became clear to me that all of those things are true. The image of the bird, duck, hedgehog and rabbit as family through love, and the dangers of comparing church and family. So I asked myself, "being sensitive to family dynamics and family systems theory, and given that I do, indeed, believe that love makes a family, what actually constitutes a family in this day and age?"

So, I googled it. And an article from The Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care<sup>1</sup> came up about the changing nature and definition of family. The article highlights how hard it is to classify family, given that it varies from culture to culture, is impacted by globalism, and is a moving definition, because

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<sup>1</sup> Rahul Sharma, "The Family and Family Structure Classification Redefined for the Current Times," Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care, 2013, [J Family Med Prim Care](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4649868/), 2013 Oct-Dec; 2(4): 306–310, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4649868/>

there are so many different ways that people are family. It didn't have an official landing place for a definition of family, but the author suggests one way to describe family is people who *share a common kitchen* and the food in it.

When I talked to Todd and Abby about finding this article, with joy in her voice, Abby shared that when she was a young adult, she and her friends lived together, shared a kitchen, and in many ways functioned as a little family! I thought, too, of the years I'd shared regular meals with friends in college or in shared apartments, and how I'd felt much the same. Maybe you've had an experience like that, where you've shared a kitchen or regular meals with people who became like your chosen family. Or a family of sorts that chose you.

Now, as many of you know, the Bible contains many examples of family, some of which we choose to reject, some of which seem archaic, less than ideal, or even violent: families where there are plural marriages (of one man married to many women), families where children or wives are treated like property, families where there is favoritism, jealousy, incest, and murder. There are less repugnant iterations of families in the Bible too, but all of this is to say, while there *are okay examples*, Bible isn't the gold standard for family dynamics or behavior. Perhaps families in the Bible are less about top notch examples, and more about a God who sticks with people, and the world, no matter what. And it seems that in *some* places, the Bible *expands* our visions of what family can be.

Take today's scriptures. In the book of Ruth, we have the story of Naomi and her husband, who immigrate from Bethlehem to Moab, because of a famine. As if famine wasn't bad enough news, more is on the way. Naomi's husband dies, followed by their two sons, who are Orpah and Ruth's husbands. And just like that, Naomi, Orpah and Ruth are on their own in a patriarchal society where men were the leaders and the voice of the family.

The only sensible thing to do in this great loss, Ruth decides, is to return to her family of origin in Bethlehem. The famine from years back is now over. She expects that Orpah and Ruth will do the same. It was just common sense, the expected custom that they'd split up, each return to their parents' homes, and try to go on. So, Orpah kisses Naomi and leaves, but Ruth does this weird thing. She stays with Naomi.

We don't know the circumstances of why, but that's what she does. Now, this ancient story is meant to be about everyday people. They are people doing what people do faced with life's challenges. But then, Ruth does an unusual thing. She stays.

Although God is not mentioned as an active participant, there's a word that *is* mentioned at least 4 times, that informs Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi.<sup>2</sup> It's the Hebrew word *hesed*, which can be translated a few ways: covenant love, loving-kindness, or love in action.<sup>3</sup> *Hesed*, is the word describing Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi. Ruth's choice to stay is *hesed* as in loved lived out. It's not abstract love, the noun, its love in motion, the verb. Its a love that thrives even outside of culture, outside of expectation, outside of the laws. It's just plain outside of the box. And it makes all the difference.

Ruth chooses loving-kindness, love in action, in the face of grief: the loss of the home she and Orpah have known, the loss of Naomi's husband, and sons who were Ruth and Orpah's husbands. Ruth makes this choice for love in action and stays, even after Naomi says, "don't call me Naomi anymore" (Naomi means pleasantness). "Instead," Naomi says, "call me Mara (which means bitter), for" she says, "my life has been made bitter."

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<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Schifferdecker, *I Love To Tell the Story* Narrative Lectionary Podcast, Working Preacher, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative\\_podcast.aspx?podcast\\_id=1030](https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1030), posted 7.14.18, accessed 5.23.19

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

But because of that word *hesed*, what this story tells us about family, is that in God's view, family is about love lived out, about love enfleshed with actions done by everyday people. Maybe Ruth's action of loving kindness, is what family at its best looks like from God's perspective.

Maybe God's family looks like the family you choose, or the family that chooses you in loving kindness. Maybe God's view of family looks like love in action, whether people are related or not. We get the same kind of message in the scripture about Jesus on the cross. Near death, Jesus makes sure—as one of the last things he says in this world—that his mother and the beloved disciple go forth from that moment treating each other as family. Jesus says to his mother, “‘here is your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Here is your mother.’ And from that hour the disciple took Mary into his own home”. Sharing a kitchen and food, doing the same thing Ruth did for Naomi, actively caring for one another in love.

Preacher Michael Curry tells a story about love in action. He heard an interview on NPR with a photographer named Norman Gershman. Gershman had just completed a documentary and photographic essay entitled, “God's House.” It's a story about Muslims of Albania during the Second World War. As the armies of the Third Reich were infecting Europe, rounding up Jews and others to kill them, they headed toward Albania. Word was forwarded to the Foreign Ministry of Albania, that the Reich was determined to find out the names of all Jews living in Albania. But the foreign minister of Albania was a Muslim, and he refused to give over the names of the Jewish people.

Before the Nazis arrived, though, the Jews of Albania had disappeared. They were hidden, because the foreign minister had organized a network of Muslim communities. And these were the words he used to inspire them: “The Jewish Children are your children. The Jewish people shall eat at your table and sleep in your homes. For the Jewish people are our family.” And the Muslims of Albania saved over 2,000 Jews from the Holocaust through that effort.<sup>4</sup>

Now that is a big, powerful story. But this week, as I've been sitting with these texts, there are also smaller local, powerful stories all around us. As a congregation, we share a common table with bread and grape juice in worship to reconnect to Jesus' ways. We consider our shared calling as caring for and standing with the vulnerable or marginalized the stranger outside the walls of this church. We share a kitchen, a meal, as we visit with one another around tables on Wednesday evenings throughout the program year. The Special Functions committee puts on receptions for events, including funerals, providing food and drink, as well as a space for grief and respite. This congregation has been sharing a kitchen, and practicing love in action. Like a family...might.

I don't know if we're called to see the church as a family. I think that depends on what we mean by family. Does it mean a closed system where unless you are related by blood or marriage, you don't belong? Where you have to be like and behave like each other to fit in? Or do we mean family as a company of people, where regardless of whether we would choose each other or not, we know God has named us beloved. And if I belong to God and you belong to God, then perhaps we are family- a place with a shared kitchen and shared food, and where we show love in action. However we define family, I know we are called to be like Ruth, and her descendant, Jesus, so that we may over and over choose love in action. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> As told by Bishop Michael Curry at Luther Seminary in 2009.  
<http://download.luthersem.edu/media/cbp/cbp2010/20101004-s.mp3>