

Doing What Family Does

Ruth 2: 1-13

Mark 12: 38-44

We like to think that “family” is a good thing, reflecting a strong bond among its members. However, families are just as much one hot mess as they are a source of security and belonging. Pastors get to see both sides in full display.

Family can be forgiving. There's the story of a young boy whose family had an outhouse. The boy hated it; hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and always smelly. The outhouse was near the creek so the boy decided that he'd push it into the water.

Later that night his dad told him that he and the boy needed to make a trip to the woodshed. The boy knew what this meant. He asked his father 'why' to which his dad replied, "Someone pushed the outhouse into the creek, and I think that someone was you. Was it?"

The boy responded that it was. Then the boy added, "Remember when George Washington's father asked him if he had chopped down the cherry tree? He didn't get into trouble because he told the truth."

"That is correct," the dad said, "but when he cut it down, his father was not in the cherry tree."

The truth about family is that it can be a tremendous blessing, but for more than a few, family can be a painful ordeal. One family you rush to embrace; the other you run away from and avoid. Family in reality can be a very mixed bag.

Recognizing such variable realities, I think that the family experience that is positive, supportive, and desirable is the one which hopefully comes to mind, at least ideally. In this ideal situation, the family is nurturing, contributing to our growth and development, a place where we can be supported, fall down and be picked up, get accepted for who we are in our uniqueness, strangeness, and individuality, organized with values of compassion, forgiveness, generosity, and love. These would be aspirations for such an ideal family.

In biblical times, family was huge – it was everything. Your identity, your life's course, your standing in society, your religious tradition, your everything, was determined by your family. Your family would extend to include your clan, your lineage, and your “people.” This was an era that when something went wrong, you returned to your family, to your people, to start over, or at least to continue your life in the place where you are supposed to be, where you can be supported, where you belong.

In the story of Ruth and Naomi, we find family stretching. Naomi was the wife of Elimelech, and they went from Bethlehem into the country of Moab, a mountainous area on the southwest end of the Dead Sea. Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem, is to the northeast of the Dead Sea, so it is quite distant. Although, Elimelech died, their two sons

would come to marry Moabite women. Naomi, of course, was under the care of the two sons. However, the two sons would both die after about ten years.

This left three women, and there came a crisis for them. It was that troublesome time when it would be appropriate for them to return to their ancestral families to find support and continue their lives. Naomi, the mother-in-law, was going to head back to Judah to her people. She told her daughters-in-law that they should return to their people, the Moabites. Naomi knows that she is too old to bear children herself, but urges the younger women to go their own way and find new husbands and have children. One of them in great sadness departs from Naomi and heads back to her people. But Ruth, the other daughter-in-law, insists that she will make her new life with Naomi, with her people, with her God. Ruth declares: *Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.*

In our passage from chapter 2, the women have arrived near Bethlehem. Being hungry and rather desperate, I'm sure, Ruth volunteers to go to a nearby field which is being harvested, to follow behind the reapers and glean the pits and pieces from the field that the reapers have left behind.

The owner of the field, Boaz, had come out from Bethlehem to see how things were going. He greeted the women who were reaping the field, and noticed this other woman coming along behind gleaning. Boaz asks about the gleaner and finds out who she is – a Moabite woman (not one of **our** people) who returned with Naomi – and they noted how tirelessly she had been working. Boaz is quite impressed. In fact, he goes out of his way to enable Ruth. He speaks with her and offers his counsel: *Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women [the reapers]. Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn.*

Boaz is obviously concerned about her safety, having told her where it is safe, and how the men were warned to be on their best behavior, not to take advantage of this young woman simply because she was not one of their people. And if Boaz is concerned about her safety, everybody else better be concerned about her safety, too, or else there could be consequences and you'll have to answer to Boaz. That could get ugly for you.

Ruth knows he has extended himself in a generous way that was quite unnecessary and even irregular, since she is nobody in a strange land among a people who are not her own. Yet this is more of what has impressed Boaz, that she has left her people to come and be among them, have followed along with Naomi in caring devotion to her. No, Ruth isn't one of Boaz's people, but she has acted as one who belongs.

While there is no explicit faith statement, and while this is really about human devotion to each other, the implicit commitment that Ruth has made to the God of Naomi has not been lost on Boaz. With Naomi's people is Naomi's God, and Ruth has pledged herself to Naomi and to her God. Boaz gets it. That it will later become clear

that the family connection is something to be reckoned with which will shape all of their futures.

Boaz doesn't need to extend his generosity and, later, his hospitality (and – oh, my – it gets complicated after that). He doesn't really need to do much of anything, the family connection is tenuous with the death of Ruth's husband, and tradition would indicate and expect her return to her own people, to those people, the Moabites. But Boaz acts to bring her into the family, to extend his table (later his blanket) and his protection, his support, his welcome, to give her a sense of place and belonging that she had no reason to expect. It is doing what family does, here, even for one who is not "family" *per se*.

In the passage from Mark's gospel, Jesus' warns about being infatuated by wealth, prestige and power before the story of the widow. Jesus cites the teachers of the law, making a great display of their faith, but really how they flaunt their power and position. These religious leaders don't mind a widow being penniless, homeless, or sick. Their version of sacred righteousness is corrupt, based on strict adherence to the laws and sanctions that govern this people of God, not their well-being. Despite such indifference to God's poor people, they pray at length as if God was sitting around waiting to hear their unique and profound wisdom. They're useless and not at all the models that Jesus' disciples should look to.

Jesus and his disciples are in the temple, and the great entertainment of the day is at the temple's collection box. Rich people could see just how generous other rich people were being (or not), and the poor people could see how they were really poor as rich people ***gave away*** more than what the poor earned in a whole year.

Imagine the oohs and aahs as the coins rattle into the collection box, like hitting a jackpot on a one-armed-bandit. Even the disciples are getting into it. Their oohs and aahs join the others. Jesus is rolling his eyes; these disciples just don't get it. They're thinking that the rich are blessed and the poor are cursed. Wrong!

He wonders how to get them **focused**. Then this shabby widow steps to the collection box. Everyone watches. Plink. Plink. She's done. A look of dismay and disdain appears on the faces of the on-lookers at such a paltry sound. Silly old widow.

But Jesus seizes the moment. 'This is what I mean,' he tells his dullard disciples. 'This widow put in her last coins, and although a tiny amount, her **faith** is so much greater. She gave out of her poverty. The wealthy give out of their wealth. They had plenty after they gave their "big" gift. That deposit in the collection box really didn't matter to them or affect their lives at all. But the widow had next to nothing. Her gift was truly faithful, a reflection of her truly faithful **spirit**.

The wealthy had already provided for themselves quite nicely. They didn't have to worry about their security. They could take a month-long cruise after they made their offering at the temple.

However, the widow would pray to God that she'd receive *something* to eat before long, having given away what little security she had.

Part of this lesson has to do with what family does. But let's remember that Jesus has disrupted any traditional notion of family. Jesus has disrupted the accepted notion of "my people." Jesus has even made the *wrong* people into *his* people, identifying God's people as every person, including the dregs, the dispossessed, the discards, and the disapproved. By identifying every person as brother and sister, including the scandalous sinners and the unwashed unrighteous, Jesus radically puts "family" on a whole different level.

Jesus levels an indictment against the religious because their concern is for themselves, for their rarified understanding of the Law. They're denounced for overlooking God's will, for ignoring the needs of God's people, for failing to put those in need at the head of the line, rather kicking them aside, or kicking them while on it.

As Jesus redefines the family of God's people, we're reminded that the religious, who are so adept at determining who is in and who is out, who is blessed and who is condemned, and who is worthy and who is not, that they've missed the whole point. Widows and orphans, tax collectors and hookers, the mentally ill and the morally debased, are all part of God's family, our family.

In the end, sin itself is redefined. Unrighteousness is not failure to comply with every statute of the law, nor is it failure to make the proper offerings. Sinfulness is finding some stupid reason to imagine that someone is not your brother or your sister, somehow not deserving of your family-style compassion, thoughtfulness, and respect. In our thoughts, our attitudes, and our actions, we need to be doing what family does for all those people we didn't realize were part of our family, God's family.

May we stretch our conception of family so that even those whom we least want to regard as family get re-evaluated as brother and sister in the Lord, in the family of God. If we can do that, maybe we can fulfill the promise of God and do what family does.