

The Story of Ruth: Friendship, Loyalty, and Love

If we are to have peace on earth, ...[o]ur loyalties must transcend our race, our tribe, our class, and our nation; and this means we must develop a world perspective.

—Martin Luther King, Jr. (December 1967)

Although Ruth's profession of devotion to her mother-in-law Naomi is the most famous part of the Book of Ruth, there is much more to her story; through this study, you will consider the themes of friendship, loyalty, and love in the context of Ruth's story and your own. What are the differences between family and friends, in Ruth's story, in modern secular life, and in Christian communities? Where does God want us to put our loyalties? Your group will consider these and other questions in your study, drawing closer to each other as well as to God.

Session 1: Overview and Ruth Chapter 1 (Loyalty) Saturday, 10:30am-12:30pm

Note: You may find that each session has too many questions to discuss all of them fully in the time allotted; feel free to focus only on questions that are most relevant or interesting to your group.

Overview of Ruth

The Book of Ruth is one of the only Old Testament books to be principally concerned with a non-Jew (i.e., Ruth herself, a Moabite). Hailed by literary critics and Biblical scholars alike as a model of a self-contained, unified narrative, "one of the Bible's most popular short stories" (*The Bible Today*, reviewing a literary study of the book), it is also one of the Five Scrolls in the Hebrew Scriptures (along with Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther) and in Jewish tradition is read aloud on the feast of Shavuot, or Pentecost.

With your group, read aloud the entire Book of Ruth. You may want to have a different person read each chapter. Spend a few minutes reflecting on the book as a whole.

- What portion of your group was familiar with this story before today? What portion of your group is coming to this story with fresh eyes? Use both experiences, if you have them represented in your group.
- What details in the story are the most striking to new or old readers? If you were familiar with this story before, had you only remembered a portion of it? What portion, and why might that be the case?

Focus on the Structure of Ruth

When we tell stories, we make decisions about the importance and order of events, the setting, the characters, and the emotions or themes we want to highlight. Consider these elements within the Book of Ruth.

- What do you notice about the structure of the Ruth? Are there smaller episodes, acts, or scenes that you see in the book? What divides them (time, space, character, emotion, dialogue, etc.)? How do they work together? Where, in your opinion, is the high point?

What's in a name? Consider the following meanings of the names in the Book of Ruth:

Elimelach (Ruth's father-in-law, of the tribe of Judah—the tribe of monarchy): “God is my king”

Naomi (Ruth's mother-in-law): derived from the Hebrew *na'im*, “pleasant”

Mahlon (Naomi's son, Ruth's first husband): “sickness”

Orpah (Ruth's sister-in-law): derived from the Hebrew *oref*, “back of the head” or “to turn away”

Kilion (Naomi's son, Orpah's husband): “decimation”

Ruth: derived from the Hebrew *re'uth*, “friend” or “friendship”

Boaz: origins unclear, but possibly meaning “strength,” “moral strength,” or “alacrity”

(Sources: <http://www.jhom.com/calendar/sivan/symbolism.htm>, <http://www.behindthename.com/php/view.php?name=ruth>, and http://www.preceptaustin.org/ruth_21-7.htm)

- Use the chart below as a short-hand outline of the book for your further discussions this weekend. Depending on the size of your group, you may want to fill out the chart as an entire group, in pairs, or in small groups (perhaps each focusing on a different chapter). For the first column, think about what you would title each chapter if you could; for other columns, jot down the setting, the characters involved, the important themes in each chapter, and any other notes or questions you may have.

| | Setting: | Characters: | Themes: | Other notes: |
|------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Chapter 1: _____ _____ | | | | |
| Chapter 2: _____ _____ | | | | |
| Chapter 3: _____ _____ | | | | |
| Chapter 4: _____ _____ | | | | |

A Closer Look: Ruth Chapter 1

Go back to the beginning of Chapter 1. You may want to read the entire chapter aloud again.

- Look at **verses 1-5**. How does this chapter begin? What about these first few verses make them feel like the beginning of a story? What kind of setting and characterization information does the writer convey at this point in the story?
- In **verse 6**, after the initial, orientation section, how does the author signal that the real action of the story of Ruth is actually beginning? Examine the active and passive verbs in the first six verses.
- **Verse 7** says that Naomi “left the place where she had been living and set out on the road.” This is the language of an archetypal journey, and countless stories—Biblical stories in the Old and New Testaments, classical literature, novels, even fantasy sagas—begin with or focus on a journey “on the road.”
Discuss the two journeys Naomi takes in this chapter; why are her journeys important?

- *Look at the breakout box at right to focus more on the theme of journeys in the stories of your own lives.*
- What do you make of Naomi’s emphasis, in **verses 11-13a**, that if Orpah and Ruth returned with her to Bethlehem their only hope of husbands would be more sons of Naomi? (Remember that Ruth and Orpah are Moabites, who would be considered outsiders in Bethlehem because of both their race and religion.)
- In **verses 13 and 20-21**, Naomi expresses her bitterness, and in **verse 20** even asks to be called “Bitter” (*Mara*). How do you feel about her statements? To what extent is she justified in such a feeling? In addition to the hardships she’s lived through, what does Naomi have to look forward to? How does God call us to act in the face of hardship and bitterness?
- Up until **verse 14**, Ruth and Orpah are treated as a unit; they are introduced one after another in **verse 4**, and then referred to as a unit (as “daughters-in-law” or “you”). In **verse 8**, even, we are told that they were both kind to Naomi. Here, though, Orpah and Ruth are contrasted for the first time. Is Orpah really doing something wrong here? Why or why not? What would you have done in her place?

Our Own Stories: Focus on the Journey

1. What brought members of your group to Boston? How many of you were born and/or raised in the area? How many people “left the place where [they] had been living” for Boston?
2. To what extent do you feel that in your life in the Boston area you are currently “on the road”—that is, unsettled or in between destinations? Though none of us knows the future, do you see yourself leaving this area at some point? What events, people, or loyalties might call you to journey to another place?
3. Naomi is headed back to what, for her, is home; where is home, for you and the members of your group? What do you need in order for your current apartment, city, or region to feel more like “home”?

The Heart of the Matter: Ruth’s Declaration of Loyalty (Verses 16-17)

This is Ruth’s famous declaration to her mother-in-law. Look closely at these verses.

- What makes them striking to your group, either in emotion or in language? What effect does considering the women’s relationship and their different ages, races, and religions have on your view of these verses?

- Often, these verses are used—sometimes out of context and sometimes with the entire chapter—at weddings. How legitimate do you think this transposition is? Must we only consider Ruth’s words as spoken by a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law? Why or why not? If members of your group feel that Ruth’s words *can* be taken out of context, consider if there are any situations in which such until-death-us-do-part expressions of loyalty would be *inappropriate*.
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Session 2: Ruth Chapter 2 (Friendship) Saturday, 7:30-9:30pm

A Closer Look: Ruth Chapter 2

Go back to the beginning of Chapter 2. Read the entire chapter aloud again and look at your notes on this chapter from your chart.

- Look at **verses 1-6**. How many times are tribal identities, clans, or family relationships mentioned in these verses? What could account for this emphasis on the part of the writer of Ruth?
- The phrase describing Boaz in **verse 1** is sometimes translated as “a man mighty in substance,” “a rich and influential man,” or “a man of outstanding character.” What do we learn about Boaz from this verse and from his words and actions later in this chapter?
- Reread the dialogue in the middle of this chapter when Boaz speaks directly to Ruth (**verses 8-14**) and when he speaks to his workmen about Ruth (**verses 15-16**). What things (both tangible and intangible) does Boaz give Ruth or promise her? How much does Ruth value these kindnesses, and how do we know?
- **Verse 12** contains a blessing from Boaz to Ruth. Look back at **Chapter 1, verses 8-9**, which also contain a blessing from Naomi to Ruth (and Orpah). What are the similarities and differences between these two blessings? What are the stated reasons for each? What does Boaz’s blessing tell us about Ruth’s faith in God at this time, unlike her faith at the moment of the blessing in Chapter 1?
- Unless we are very familiar with Biblical harvest stories or other farming practices, many of the actual agricultural details of Ruth 2 may seem very opaque to us. See what your group can make of this process. In **verse 17**, for instance, Ruth “threshed the barley she had gathered,” which means she separated the edible grain from the straw in the barley stalks.
- Look at **Deuteronomy 24:19** for an explanation of why Ruth is allowed to glean (take for herself the dropped and forgotten pieces of barley stalks) in the field behind Boaz’s harvesters. (As a side note, even Jesus and his disciples gleaned—see **Matthew 12:1**.)
- In **verse 20**, Naomi uses the Hebrew word *go’el*, which means “kinsman-redeemer,” to describe Boaz. This is an important concept, first explained in the Law of Moses (see **Leviticus 25:25, 47-49**), allowing the closest family member who is able to do so to buy back, or redeem, the property of a member of his clan. The story of Ruth is often considered an allegory; in what ways is Jesus our kinsman-redeemer?
- What do we learn about Ruth and Naomi’s relationship with each other from **verses 18-23**? How close are the two women? How do they support each other, emotionally and physically, as family and friends in these verses?
- *Look at the breakout box on the next page to focus more on the theme of friendship in your own lives.*

Ruth and Relationships: Friendship

Look at the poem at right by Marge Piercy, acclaimed contemporary American poet and novelist. Read the poem aloud with your group and talk about what words or images you find striking. Your group may want to break up into single-sex groups to discuss the questions on this page related to friendships in the poem, the Book of Ruth, and your own lives.

- Consider Piercy's view that when rereading Ruth, "it is a shock / how little it resembles memory." Is this true for your group? Do you agree with Piercy that the book shows more of a concern "with inheritance, / lands, men's names" than a simple focus on Ruth's loyalty to Naomi? Why do you think this is?
- Piercy argues that Ruth is, at least on some level, a woman's book ("women have kept it dear") about an ideal intergenerational female friendship. First of all, to what extent do you agree with her claim that all women "dream / a double, heart's twin, a sister / of the mind"? To what extent do you think men similarly dream of a double, an intense male friendship? Are there other Biblical models of friendship that come to mind? Next, to what extent do you agree with Piercy that Naomi and Ruth represent such an ideal friendship? Return to Ruth for evidence.

Our Own Stories: Focus on Friendship

1. How is Ruth and Naomi's relationship (in the poem and the text) a general model for Christian friendship (single-sex or coed)? Is there anything missing from their friendship, in your opinion? Is there a friend whom you would support as Ruth and Naomi support each other?

2. How does a person go about creating friendships with this kind of intimacy and commitment? Can we proactively make them happen, or do we just wait and hope that they occur?

3. Have you or other members of your group had intergenerational friendships? What obstacles stand in the way of developing such friendships?

The Book of Ruth and Naomi

—Marge Piercy, in *Mars and Her Children* (1992)

When you pick up the Tanakh¹ and read the Book of Ruth, it is a shock how little it resembles memory. It's concerned with inheritance, lands, men's names, how women must wiggle and wobble to live.

Yet women have kept it dear for the beloved elder who cherished Ruth, more friend than daughter. Daughters leave. Ruth brought even the baby she made with Boaz home as a gift.

Where you go, I will go too, your people shall be my people, I will be a Jew for you, for what is yours I will love as I love you, oh Naomi my mother, my sister, my heart.

Show me a woman who does not dream a double, heart's twin, a sister of the mind in whose ear she can whisper, whose hair she can braid as her life twists its pleasure and pain and shame. Show me a woman who does not hide in the locket of bone that deep eye beam of fiercely gentle love she had once from mother, daughter, sister; once like a warm moon that radiance aligned the tides of her blood into potent order.

At the season of first fruits,² we recall two travelers, co-conspirators, scavengers making do with leftovers and mill ends, whose friendship was stronger than fear, stronger than hunger, who walked together, the road of shards, hands joined.

¹ The complete text of the Jewish holy scriptures.

² A reference to the feast of Shavuot, a harvest feast, when the Book of Ruth is read aloud.

Session 3: Ruth Chapters 3-4 (Love)
Sunday, 10:15am-12:00pm

A Closer Look: Ruth Chapters 3-4

Go back to the beginning of Chapter 3. Read all of Chapters 3 and 4 aloud again and look at your notes on these chapters from your chart.

- What do you think of Naomi for the instructions she gives in **Chapter 3, verses 1-4**? What are her motives here? What are her expectations about what Boaz might “tell [Ruth]...to do”? What feelings might you speculate are behind Ruth’s agreement in **verses 5-6**?
- Compare the image of protection in Ruth’s request in **Chapter 3, verse 9** to the image in Boaz’s blessing in **Chapter 2, verse 12**; keeping in mind Boaz’s status as kinsman-redeemer, what further connections can we make from the similarity of these images? What kind of protection is Boaz offering Ruth, and how does she trust him in this scene? Where else do we see Ruth’s trust in Boaz (and Naomi) in this chapter?
- Much of Ruth’s and Boaz’s relationship seems to be an exchange of blessings and kindnesses (or loyalty); what is Boaz talking about when he compliments Ruth in **Chapter 3, verse 10**? What “kindness” or loyalty has Ruth “showed [him] earlier”? What kindnesses does he show her in **verses 14-15**?
- What feelings do you have at the end of **verse 18**, the very end of Chapter 3? What seems different about this chapter break than others in Ruth?
- What do we learn about Boaz from the way he approaches this encounter (**Chapter 4, verses 1-11**) with the elders and the closer kinsman-redeemer, who has first right of refusal of Ruth and Naomi’s property?
- The ritualistic offering of a shoe in **Chapter 4, verse 8** may seem an unusual way for us to seal a deal, but at the time of this story it was tradition; assume that, in our age, Boaz and his kinsman would instead shake hands or sign a contract. What does the narrator’s parenthetical note in **verse 7** tell us about the intended audience? What other notes, in earlier chapters, suggest distance between the time of the events of this book and the time of its writing?
- Examine the blessings in **Chapter 4, verses 11-13**. How do these compare to the blessings earlier in the Book of Ruth?
- How do you feel about the marriage of Ruth and Boaz in **verse 13**? What clues throughout the Book of Ruth suggest that they are a well-matched pair?
- Ruth and Naomi’s relationship reappears near the end of this book, in **verses 15-16**. In what ways is Ruth “better to [Naomi] than seven sons”? Why do the women in **verse 16** conclude that “Naomi has a son”? What does this say about Ruth and Naomi’s relationship at this point?
- *Look at the breakout box on the next page to focus more on the theme of love (romantic and familial) in your own lives.*
- What makes the end of this chapter (**verses 13-22**) feel like a genuine ending to the entire story? Are there any unanswered questions in your mind about the characters or events at this point?

Our Own Stories: Focus on Love

1. Think about your understanding of romantic love, as for a husband or a wife. Is there any element not mentioned in the depiction of Ruth and Boaz's relationship that you feel is essential to the love between a husband and wife? What characteristics would you look for in a spouse? Why?
2. In your opinion, how is love for family similar to or different from love for friends? Why is this?
3. Think about the story of Ruth and the idea of Genesis 2:24. What kind of balance do you think there should be between love for a spouse and love for other family members (mother, father, etc.)? What relationships in your life do you find difficult to keep in balance with your other relationships? How can we try to keep a Christian perspective on the many conflicting demands for our time, attention, and love?

Looking Back on the Book of Ruth

- As a way of summarizing some of your earlier conversation, think about what we learn from the example of Ruth's behavior in this chapter and earlier. However, don't forget that the Book of Ruth is also a highly constructed, artful narrative: therefore, how does the Book of Ruth, as Horace would say, both "delight and instruct"?
- Another purpose of the story of Ruth relates to its final verses (**Chapter 4, verses 17b-22**). Re-read those verses and consider them in light of the following passages:
 - **Micah 5:2**
 - **Isaiah 11:1**
 - **Matthew 1:1-6, 17**
 - **Luke 2:4**

Ruth and Relationships: Loyalty

Remember that Christianity is often referred to as a religion of relationships—our relationships with Christ and with each other. Look back at the quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. that begins this study and think about the role of loyalty in relationships with others.

- Both prophetic and New Testament texts come to mind when thinking about King's nonjudgmental "world perspective" on the subject of loyalty; consider the following passages:
 - **Isaiah 56:7b**
 - **Matthew 28:18-19**
 - **James 2:1-4**
- Finally, what do you think about King's claim in the context of your insights from the Book of Ruth? How do Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz illustrate the idea of "loyalties transcend[ing]...race [and] tribe"?
- Where do you feel God calling us as individuals, friends, church members, and citizens to put *our* loyalties?

Sources:

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