

Semicontinuous
Ruth 1:1–18
 Ps. 146

Complementary
 Deut. 6:1–9
 Ps. 119:1–8
 Heb. 9:11–14
 Mark 12:28–34

Fierce Inclusivity

**Goal for
 the Session**

Through the story of fierce inclusivity shown in Ruth, adults will commit to including others in their lives.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Ruth 1:1–18

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” John Ahn

Verse 8 has another important term, *hesed*, meaning loving-kindness, faithfulness, or loyalty. Just as the daughters-in-law show *hesed* to the dead, Naomi also seeks *hesed* for her daughters-in-law. Her ultimate wish for them is to “find security . . . in the house of your husband” (v. 9b). After Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth, the women all lift their voices and weep. There is some debate about whether it is only Orpah and Ruth who cry or all three. The climax of the section seems more powerful with the bonding moment (v. 9) in which those who have lost their husbands cry out loud. Verse 10 is short, yet poignantly relays that the daughters-in-law will return with Naomi to her people.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Kathleen M. O’Connor

In the book of Ruth, God is not a main character. The action takes place among humans in everyday life, but God’s role is implicit in the interactions and plot reversals of the story. Ruth reverses the trajectory of Naomi’s life from despair and death to fertility and hope. What starts in barrenness and negation ends with fruitfulness and new birth, not only of a baby but of a family and of the whole people of Israel. Naomi holds a grandchild in her lap, knowing that her husband’s name will live in memory in the future. “Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin” (4:14), say the women at the birth of Obed, Naomi’s grandson.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Gary W. Charles

Ruth “clings” to her mother-in-law, ignoring Naomi’s instructions and recalling for readers Genesis 2:24 (“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh”). Thus family bonds are broken and a new family is born. In Ruth, we learn that an alien woman is a distant ancestor of Jesus and a forerunner of what Jesus will ask his Hebrew disciples to do: to “cling” to him by letting go of all that “clings” to them, including their ethnic-religious presuppositions.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Dale P. Andrews

Verses 8–18 depict the women’s efforts to discern how to care for each other. Orpah does attempt to stay with Naomi, but in the end follows Naomi’s renewed appeals. Orpah is not unethical or unfaithful. Still, Ruth does demonstrate the extra measure. Her faithfulness and her care do not simply lead to a deeper relationship with Naomi and her own new relationship with YHWH, but also evidence how God works with us through relationships. Both Naomi and Ruth experience the inbreaking of God through their faithful relationship. An important theme to the whole narrative of Ruth is underscored in the way faithful human relationships reflect divine care and therefore the covenantal care of community.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Ruth 1:1–18

Focus on Your Teaching

Humans tend to prefer the familiar: their tribe, their family, their church. We fear outsiders, those who look differently, speak differently, believe differently. The story of Ruth represents a strong biblical current that challenges any sense of closing ranks. For some participants this may be a welcome message, especially if they have been on the outside. For others it may unsettle their notions of a comfortable Christian community.

Open my eyes, O God, that I may see your presence in the world around me, in the people around me. Move me to embrace your radically inclusive Word, that I may open it to others through this lesson. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- map of Bible times that includes Judah and Moab
- newsprint or board
- marker
- paper
- pens
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for November 8, 2015

For Responding

- option 1: paper, pens
- option 2: paper, colored markers, pens
- option 3: newsprint or board, marker

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome participants as they arrive and introduce any newcomers. Give each person a sheet of paper and pen. Have them draw three large concentric circles and label the inside circle “immediate faith family,” the middle circle “extended faith family,” and the outside circle “close faith friends (almost family).” Ask them to spend a few minutes and write the names of people who fit in each circle.

Come together as a large group and briefly discuss how their relationships differ, if at all, between people in different circles. Ask how rigid the lines are between groups. For example, how does loyalty to one another change between those who are immediate faith family and those who are in the outside circle?

Tell the group that today’s story of Ruth and Naomi challenges boundaries placed by religion and culture.

Offer the following prayer or one of your choosing:

You call us your children, O God, heirs with your Son. Draw us together as a family of faith, as we study your Word and offer our worship. Amen.

EXPLORING

Before reading the focus scripture, have people turn to a map in their Bibles that shows Judah and Moab in Old Testament times. Without giving too much detail, tell them that Naomi and her husband and two sons were from Judah and immigrated to the rival region of Moab. Find Bethlehem, where the family is from, and Moab, where the focus scripture events take place.

Take turns reading Ruth 1:1–18 with each person reading a verse until the reading is completed.

The book of Ruth is a very short, engaging story. If there is time, have participants read the entire book (only four chapters) before reading the focus scripture. If there is not time, encourage them to read it at home.

Levirite marriage laws were based around males. As Naomi lost her husband and her two male sons, she was extremely vulnerable to violence and hunger. Ruth's choice to follow this woman offered absolutely no promise of safety or well-being.

Assist the group in drawing the family tree identified in the focus scripture on the board or newsprint. Retell the story and cross out the men as their deaths are told, leaving Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth each alone next to their husband (Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion) who is crossed out. Use the information from the sidebar to explain Levirite marriage laws.

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Ruth 1:1–18) and read the “What?” excerpt. Discuss:

- ✧ How is Naomi's situation of widowhood different than that of Orpah and Ruth?
Answers should include that Naomi is in a foreign land and more vulnerable than the others. She is also older.
- ✧ Why is the response to Naomi's blessing in verse 10 by the two daughters-in-law so risky?
- ✧ How is God's *hesed* (steadfast love) shown through Ruth's actions?

If you did not read the entire book of Ruth, explain to the group that it is a brief book included in the Hebrew Scriptures. It directly counters the actions taken by many Jewish leaders after the return to their homeland following forced exile in the sixth century CE. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah strongly support the efforts of many religious and political leaders to restore an ethnic purity by excluding foreigners. It was common for non-Jews who married Jews during the exile to be sent away, so strong was the prevailing intolerance of the outsider. The books of Ruth, Jonah, and Isaiah 40–55 directly contradict the exclusionary rules of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (The Story of Ruth), and have participants read it quietly. Ask:

- ✧ What does it mean that the Bible contains both Ezra and Nehemiah, who demand the exclusion of foreigners from Israel, *and* the Bible contains Ruth?

Refer to Resource Sheet 1, and have a volunteer read the “Where?” excerpt. Ask:

- ✧ How did Ruth's commitment to Naomi require a leap of hope?
- ✧ What beliefs do you think she held dear that led her to take this action?

Explain that Ruth's oath in verses 16–17 solidifies her commitment to Naomi. The two women are not blood relatives and are no longer related by marriage. Have a volunteer read the “So What?” excerpt from Resource Sheet 1. Discuss the relationship between Ruth's “clinging” to Naomi and the promises Ruth makes to Naomi in her oath. Ask:

- ✧ What must Naomi let go of in order to accept Ruth's commitment to her?

To transition to Responding, discuss:

- ✧ What do we or the church have to let go of to accept God's love for everyone?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **Expanding Your Circle of Friends** Participants will make a commitment to include persons they would not include normally in their lives and broaden their understanding

EASY
PREP

of the breadth of God's love. Distribute pens and have participants revisit the concentric circles prepared in Gathering. Ask:

✿ How has this study of Ruth and Naomi expanded your understanding of God's people?

Give participants time to work individually to consider people who are not included in their inner circles, people with whom they do not normally associate. Have them write the names of these individuals or groups in the corresponding circles.

Challenge participants to consider ways they might connect with the named groups of people with whom they do not normally associate. Have them write and commit to one action they will take to expand their friends.

- 2. Modern-Day Story of Ruth** Imagining a modern-day example of Ruth will help participants connect the theme of inclusion to daily life. Suggest to the group that the theme of inclusion is as relevant today as it was in the time of Naomi and Ruth. Invite participants to pretend they are screenwriters creating a modern day television series based on the themes of inclusion discussed in today's session. Either work as individuals or in small groups. Distribute paper, colored markers, and pens. Have them write the basic plot of the series and add as many details as they can imagine. Who are the groups that are included? What boundaries are crossed and what risks are taken?

Gather as a large group and have each person or small group tell about the series they created.

- 3. Including Others in Our Community** Participants will consider ways to make "outsiders" feel more included in their church. Ask participants to first call out characteristics of the majority of people in your church. Race, ethnicity, income status, and theology are examples that might be given. List these on a board or newsprint. Draw a circle around this list. Now have people call out those who might not be in this group who the church needs to better welcome. Brainstorm ways to reach out to these people and also to make those who already come feel more included. Have participants commit to doing one thing in the next few weeks to reach out to others.

CLOSING

Gather participants and have them share one concrete action they take away from one of the Responding activities they completed in this session.

Send participants out with this blessing, adapted from 1 Peter 2:10:

Once we were not a people.

Now we are God's people.

Once we had not received mercy.

Now we have received mercy, in abundance.

May God's loving-kindness go with us wherever we go.

Go in God's peace.

If you plan to use option 3 in Responding in the next session, invite your pastor or a church leader responsible for stewardship or finance to speak with your class about faithful offerings.

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November 1, 2015
Fierce Inclusivity

Adult
Resource Sheet 2

The Story of Ruth

This short Old Testament book delivers a message of God’s radical inclusivity as it follows the developing relationship between Naomi, a follower of the God of Judah, and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth. The two women meet when Naomi is living in Moab as an alien, a foreigner from the rival land of Judah. The lineage of the two women could not have been more unconnected.

Ruth’s initial connection to Naomi comes through Ruth’s marriage to one of Naomi’s sons. After the son’s death, legal ties no longer hold the women together. With no living offspring, Naomi determines to return to her homeland of Judah. Ruth vows to go with her, to embrace Naomi’s people and Naomi’s god—the God of Judah.

In Naomi’s homeland, Ruth takes a job gleaning in the fields. She meets and marries Boaz, a Bethlehemite. She bears him a son, Obed, who will one day father Jesse and be the grandfather of David, the forerunner of Jesus.

“Ruth makes an improbable companion to Naomi and an unlikely character to have a biblical book named after her. She is a foreigner, a woman, a widow, and, perhaps of most importance, she is an enemy of Israel. The book repeatedly reminds readers of Ruth’s enemy status by referring to her as ‘Ruth the Moabite’ (v. 22).

“In the ancient world, tribal and family origins firmly fixed one’s identity and one’s gods, and people did not voluntarily abdicate either. Yet Ruth abandons people and gods to vow undying love for her mother-in-law and for the God of Judah. The outsider is the faithful one, the one who expresses and lives her commitment to God and God’s people.

“The stranger, the widow, and enemy woman becomes the unexpected model of loyalty and devotion. . . . Ruth the Moabite, will save the line of David. The outsider keeps the nation from extinction; she saves the people, ends barrenness, and gives life to a dying seed.”

—From Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 244.

