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NT 4225: Genesis to Revelation
January 16, 2016

Bible Study Session One: Ruth

Lesson Foundations

Context: Large group; Youth (middle school)

- This session is designed to be used with a large middle school Confirmation class. This session would be one in a year-long series about the Bible.
- The large group will also include 5-6 adult leaders who will help facilitate small group discussion with students during the session.

Text: Ruth 1

- This session will focus primarily on the first chapter of Ruth, although references will be made throughout the lesson to the story as a whole.

Duration of lesson: Approximately one hour

Lesson Theme: Belonging in Community

- This session will use the story of Naomi and Ruth to guide students through a conversation on what it means to belong in a community. Specifically, this session will invite participants to consider how we as a church community welcome the outsider into our midst.

Study Resources Used

1. Beattie, D.R.G. "Ruth, Book of." *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*. <http://www.ministrymatters.com.luthersem.idm.oclc.org/library/#/dbi/cae3845a784844910704e21d16ed61ef/ruth-book-of.html>. Accessed Jan. 16, 2016. (The dictionary is a compilation of articles written by various contributors. This article gives an overview of the book of Ruth, with an emphasis on the history of commentaries and interpretations of this text. This article includes the background on both ancient and modern interpretations of the text, giving a general overview of each and providing an idea of each interpretation's credibility.)
2. Meeks, Wayne A. *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993. (Specifically, I have referenced the introduction to the book of Ruth, found on pages 408 and 409. This section was written by Adele Berlin. This introduction uses the themes of loyalty, faithfulness, and family to give an overview of the book.)
3. Schifferdecker, Kathryn M. "Commentary on Ruth 1:1-22." *Ruth 1:1-22 Commentary*. October 16, 2011. Accessed January 18, 2016. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1108. (This article frames the story of Naomi and Ruth in *hesed*, which is a Hebrew word that describes a faithful love. The author asserts that the characters in the book of Ruth demonstrate

hesed, and in turn embody the incarnation of a *hesed* God, who loves and blesses them at by end of the story.)

4. "Ruth 1:1-22, Overview." *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. 2. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
<http://www.ministrymatters.com.luthersem.idm.oclc.org/library/#/tnib/68eed4ac52125f7e0eb8c41965ba7e0a/overview.html> (The author of this commentary makes the point that the story of Naomi and Ruth includes moments when they “turn” and “turn back.” The point is made that the Hebrew word meaning “turn” is used in the first chapter of the book twelve times. The use of this word is symbolic, and it hints that the story includes role reversals. This commentary also connects the book of Ruth to the book of Judges.)

Background Information for Leaders

What’s the Story?

The text for this session comes from Ruth 1:1-22. This narrative chronicles the relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Ruth, a Moabite, marries one of Naomi’s sons. After their husbands die, Naomi decides to leave Moab and return to her homeland, and Ruth insists on travelling with her. Even when Naomi tells Ruth to return to her parents’ home and start a new life, Ruth insists on travelling to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law. Though our story for today ends at the end of chapter 1, we should note that the book ends on a happy note—Ruth is welcomed into her new land, marries a man named Boaz, and grows a family. Eventually, her descendants will include King David, and, over time, Jesus.

Though we do not know when exactly this book was written, most scholars place it between the reign of David and the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (this would put it somewhere between 950 and 700 BC).¹ Ruth 1:1 suggests that this story takes place during the rule of the judges. The book of Judges (which is placed before Ruth in the Christian Old Testament) contains stories of Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, and the consequences that come from that. Ruth, on the other hand, shows us the ways in which kindness, compassion, and following the laws of God bring peace and new life. It is significant that this is illustrated by Ruth—someone who is considered a foreigner, and does not have to follow the laws of Israel.

What’s the Theme?

This session is centered on the theme of *belonging in community*. Because of her love for her mother-in-law, Ruth chooses to stay with her and enter into a relationship with the God of Israel. Ruth’s words to Naomi in 1:16-17 shows that she feels a part of Naomi’s family and will not abandon her. Ruth, someone who is considered an outsider, has found a community in which she feels welcomed. In return, she shows faithfulness and loyalty (the Hebrew word used in this text is *hesed*).

For students who are navigating the murky waters of middle school, belonging in community is important. Middle school is a time of transition and discovery. Students enter new schools, meet new people, and grapple with changes. In times of change and transition, belonging in a community can bring peace and comfort. Faithfulness and loyalty to and from family, friends, and God is something that can ground adolescents and guide them through this difficult change.

¹ *The HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 409.

The Lesson

Opening Activity (10 minutes)

Opening Prayer: Say: **Holy God, be present with us as we listen to your Word. Open our eyes and hearts to your love and faithfulness in our lives. Amen.**

Opening Game: Blob Tag

1. Ask students to spread out around the room. Set boundaries if needed.
2. Pick one person to be “it.” At your signal, the group should begin playing a game of tag.
3. When “it” tags someone, they must join hands so that the tagged person becomes a part of the “it” blob. The game of tag continues.
4. The “it” blob continues tagging people. As a person is tagged, they must join the blob.
5. The game ends when the whole group is holding hands, and a part of the blob.
6. After the game, ask students to find a partner and answer the following questions:
 - **Did you like being a part of the “it” blob? Why or why not?**
 - **Was it easier or harder for “it” to capture people as the blob got bigger? Why?**
 - **Has there ever been a time in your life when you have received kindness and help from someone? What happened? How did you feel?**
7. If you have time, take some responses to the questions from the large group.

Exploring the Story (35 minutes)

Telling the Story: Naomi and Ruth

1. Ask students to open their Bibles to the book of Ruth. Walk them through the process of finding the story, if needed.
2. **Today we are going to hear a story from the book of Ruth. We don’t know exactly when this book of the Bible was written, but we can guess that it was probably created sometime after the reign of King David. This book is a narrative—meaning that it tells a story. The two central characters in this story are Naomi and her daughter-in-law, Ruth. Let’s read the story together and see what happens!**
3. Begin reading the story (story sequence is in Appendix A). Stop where indicated in the script for teaching and/or large group discussion.
4. When you arrive at Ruth 1:16-17 (the section that begins with “Do not press me to leave you…”), ask the large group to read those verses together. Display these words on the screen or wall for the group to see and use for reading.
5. After you finish telling the story, ask students and adult leaders to break into their small groups to discuss the story. Everyone should have their Bible with them during the discussion.

Discussing the Story: Naomi and Ruth

1. Small groups should discuss the following questions:
 - a. **How do you think Naomi and her family felt when they first moved to Moab? Why do you think they felt this way?**

- b. **Why do you think Ruth decided to return to Bethlehem with Naomi, even though Naomi insisted that she return to her parents' house?**
- c. **Re-read Ruth 1:16-17 aloud as a small group. Imagine that you are Ruth. To whom would you say these words? Who might say these words to you?**
- d. **What are some of the communities that you belong to? Why do feel like you belong to these communities?**
- e. **Think about a time in your life when you have faced a big change. What happened? Who helped you through that time?**

Bringing it Back Together

1. Invite small groups to come back into the large group.
2. Ask one or two groups to share what they discussed.
3. **One key theme in the story of Naomi and Ruth is the theme of belonging in community. Naomi and Ruth went through some major life changes, but they had each other and their community to get them through. They loved each other, and belonging in their community showed them that they were loved and accepted. Who are some people (or what are some communities) that helps you get through big changes?**

Applying the Story (10 minutes)

Home

1. **In a moment, we are going to watch the music video for the song “Home.” As we watch the video, think about what lyrics or parts of the song remind you of today’s story.**
2. Play the music video for the song “Home” by Philip Phillips (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HoRkntoHkIE>).
3. After the video has played, ask the following questions:
 - a. **What are some words from the lyrics or images from the video that remind you of today’s story?** Write the group’s responses to this question on a large flipchart or sheet of paper.
 - b. **What are some adjectives that you would use to describe what it means to be at a place called “home?”** Write the group’s responses to this question on another sheet of paper, or page of the flipchart.
 - c. **Why might belonging in community help you feel like a place is “home?”** Ask students to find a partner and discuss this question. If you have time, take a few responses.
4. **A home can take many different forms. Different people define the word “home” in different ways. However, a home is typically a place where people feel welcomed, and where they feel like they can live. A home can be more than a building. Naomi and Ruth remind us that a home can be where your community is. In order to call a place home, we have to feel like we belong there.**

Closing (5 minutes)

Putting it all Together

1. Ask students to turn to a partner and share one thing they learned about the book of Ruth.
2. After one minute, invite a few students to share what they learned.
3. Close in prayer: **Loving God, you are with us everywhere we go. Remind us that we have places of belonging, and help us welcome others into our community, too. We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen.**
4. Thank students for their time, and let them know what they will be learning next week!

Appendix A

Ruth 1:1-22 Story Script

Tell the story below, pausing for teaching and discussion when indicated.

Read Ruth 1:1-2.

- *Things to note: Elimelech is pronounced “uh-lihm-uh-laek,” Mahlon is pronounced “m-ai-l-uh-n,” and Chilion is pronounced “ch IH l-y uh n.”²*
- *The reference to judges in the first sentence of the story connects this book to the book that is located before it in the Christian Bible—the book of Judges.*
- *The Israelites were not fond of the land of Moab. Earlier stories in the Bible suggest that, while wandering in the wilderness, Israel found hostility in Moab and made them enemies.*

Read Ruth 1:3-7

- *Things to note: In verse 3, the storyteller shifts the focus of the story away from Elimelech, and onto Naomi. Ask students to pay attention to where the story’s focus stays for the rest of the chapter.*
- *Ruth and Orpah are both from Moab; when they begin the journey “home” with Naomi, they are now considered the foreigners.*
- **QUESTION TO ASK: Why do you think Naomi wanted to return to Bethlehem?**

Read Ruth 1:8-14

- **QUESTION TO ASK: What does Naomi want for her daughters-in-law? Why would she want this? How does each daughter respond?**
- *By asking them to go back to their “mother’s house,” Naomi is asking them to return home and begin a new lives with new husbands.*
- *In v. 8, many Bible translations use some form of the word “kind” to translate the Hebrew word “hesed.” This word describes a type of love that shows unconditional loyalty and kindness, far beyond what is required by law.*
- *Some of Naomi’s words in this part of the story might sound hopeless. In v. 13, she says that God has turned against her. She hopes that Ruth and Orpah might find hope in finding a new life back at home.*
- *Orpah leaves the story very quickly—this is in contrast to Ruth, who continues to cling to her mother-in-law.*

Read Ruth 1:15-18 (NOTE: Have the group read verses 16-17 together.)

- *Ruth’s plea in v. 16-17 is significant because she dedicates herself to not only staying with Naomi, but also dedicates herself to walking a life with God. Remember that to the early readers of this story, Ruth was a foreigner. In this act, she is showing more dedication to God and to her family than some of the Israelites!*
- **QUESTION TO ASK: Why would Ruth make such a plea to Naomi?**
- *Ruth’s speech shows that her character embodies “hesed” in this story.*

² Pronunciations of names is from www.pronouncenames.com.

- Verse 18 says, “When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.” This statement can be taken several ways. QUESTION: What do you think is meant by Naomi’s silence?

Read Ruth 1:19-22

- QUESTION TO ASK: How do the people of Bethlehem react to Naomi’s return? How does Naomi respond to them?
- Verse 22 is the first time that Ruth is directly referred to as a Moabite. This might give us a clue as to how the community first views Ruth—they see her as an outsider.
- QUESTION TO ASK: This is as far as we will read in Naomi and Ruth’s story. However, you can tell by looking at your Bible that the story continues? What do you think happens? How do you think their story ends? Will Ruth and Naomi be welcomed into the community at Bethlehem?

If you have time, have students scan through the rest of the book.

- **Do you get a sense of the rest of the story, by scanning the rest of the book? What happens?** [Ruth meets Boaz; they get married, and have a son. Ruth 4:17 suggests that the community turns around and welcomes Ruth into the community.]