

## **A Kindom Kind of Love**

Scripture: Ruth 1 | July 3, 2022

Reference: *all about love* by bell hooks

**Overview:** For quite some time, I have had a difficult time reckoning my identity as a pastor at a Christian church while those in places of power continue to conflate the Church with White supremacist, capitalist, nationalism. Especially in the midst of a holiday weekend where people across the country will be celebrating a false sense of freedom with hot dogs and fireworks while right after right gets stripped away, where harm after harm is done - in the name of so-called Christian values. So many loveless actions allegedly arising from a tradition based on love - God's love for all of Creation.

This disconnect feels scary to me. We have so many sayings with assumed shared understanding love - especially in Christian faith - Love is love. God is love. I love you. "The greatest commandment is to love God with all you heart and all your soul and with all your mind and the second is to love your neighbor as yourself." "For God so loved the world..."

What does any of it actually mean? If we are not operating from a shared understanding of something as foundational as love, a basic grounding principle, how can we live into the kindom of God - truly making family of one another if we do not have share the same framework for what it means to be loving toward one another?

Today we are working from the theme "A Kindom Kind of Love" - we have been talking for months about what it means to really make family of one another - to be the kindom of God in the ways we relate to one another and show one another love. Today we will explore what does it mean to love and be loved. How does love move from a concept to a practice of healing and connection.

**Closer Look at Scripture:** The story of Naomi and Ruth demonstrates the complexities of and commitments required in choosing to be loving. Naomi, whose husband and two sons have died - is living in the midst of a famine. And as you could imagine, is in deep pain.

Naomi, in the all of her grief, is concerned about the wellbeing and future of her widowed daughter-in-laws - she says look...I don't have anything to offer I can promise no more sons or sense of financial stability for you. Please go be on your way. So her first daughter-in-law Orpah is like "yeah okay that sounds completely logical - gives her a kiss on the cheek and heads out.

Naomi says to Ruth - look, your sister-in-law left to go back to her people - you go ahead and do the same. Ruth says - listen...where you go, i will go - **you shall be my people**. In this moment Ruth says - I choose to love you. And Naomi allows herself to receive Ruth's love.

Then - Naomi takes her love a step further. She says, "Call me no longer Naomi - call me Mara, for God has dealt bitterly with me. Naomi means "pleasant" and Mara means "bitter."

She is open about her grief, she is courageous in her vulnerability, she is transparent about her frustrations with God. She doesn't hide from it. It says - Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. The togetherness - Ruth's commitment, responsibility, and respect for Naomi gave Naomi the space to trust and be courageous in her honesty.

Their story continues in the following chapters, and these acts of love lead to more love.

Although the story of Ruth and Naomi demonstrates love in action - it still doesn't give us the a common language or clear shared understanding of what love is and what love is not.

bell hooks has a lot to say about love in her book *All About Love* - her words and wisdom have been a comfort and a catalyst to me in the last few weeks.

On her journey to defining love, hooks leans heavily on M. Scott Peck's definition of love: "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth. Love is as love does. Love is an act of will - namely both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love."

Hooks breaks it down even more and says **"Genuine love is a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect."**

Moving within bell hooks' definition of love, three important elements emerge about love that undergird a Kingdom kind of Love:

**1. Love requires unlearning harmful patterns and practices.**

- a. *Ruth ignored the customs of her time and risked it all to show love to her mother-in-law.*
- b. We have been conditioned about love within a loveless system - a system void of care, respect, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility. A system that seeks power and profit over all.
- c. This way of defining and experiencing what is called "love" has allowed us to settle - to call abuse, neglect, manipulation - love.
- d. It is not in the systems best interest for us to REALLY love ourselves and one another - especially in the ways the bell hooks calls us to love - and we have to remember that.
- e. Even the containers where we first learn love - the nuclear family - are fabricated by the system for the system. Hooks says, "Capitalism and patriarchy together, as structures of domination, have worked overtime to undermine and destroy [the] larger unit of extended kin. Replacing the family community with a more privatized small autocratic unit helped increase alienation and made abuses of power more possible." We are not meant to do any of this alone - but wow, they sure can make more profit if we try to do it alone.

- f. We have been taught how to love by people who may not know how to give love or receive love in the first place. This means we have a lot of unlearning and reconstructing to do in the love department.
  - g. We must release the oppressive system-supporting patterns and practices that we have confused as love or loving in order to wrap ourselves and our community in the care, respect, commitment, trust, knowledge, and responsibility that hooks calls us to.
- 2. Love is an action and an art form.**
- a. *Ruth did not say I love you, here is a kiss on the cheek, good luck figuring out this famine old lady. She made the active choice to accompany Naomi - to truly make family of her - even though she had no legal obligation to.*
  - b. Love is not a romantic feeling, prince charming, instagram post-worthy moments. Love is also not a cycle of abuse and forgiveness, paving the way for more abuse. Love is an ethic, a way of being in the world. Love is an action that is always pointed at valuing and nurturing human life and the lives of all non-human beings - plants, animals, etc. Love is a choice we make to ourselves and to others.
  - c. It is not lost on me that hooks' definition of love is not all that clear - it is more a list of required criteria rather than a clearcut definition or a roadmap. She says - you cannot be loved/loving if you are not respected, cared for, committed, if you do not experience trust, if you do not pursue knowledge about the other person or being, if you do not take responsibility. If one or more of these elements are missing - it is not love you are feeling - but another attachment. It could be a relationship certainly, but not love.
  - d. The artform comes through your commitment to balancing each of these elements in your own beautiful and unique ways.
- 3. Love does not avoid tension or grief.**
- a. *Naomi - because she felt the love and commitment of Ruth - was able to publicly claim her grief rather than stifle it or ignore it.*
  - b. Love is not all rainbows and butterflies - love does not mean toxic positivity, or staying silent when abuse and manipulation are present for the sake of keeping the peace or the illusion of love.
  - c. Love is big, gritty, messy, and strong enough to hold our grief, our anger, our frustrations. Hooks says, "Love knows no shame. To be loving is to be open to grief, to be touched by sorrow, even sorrow that is unending. The way we grieve is informed by whether we know love." This is an expressing of our commitment and our communion with one another.
  - d. As we move toward healing, embracing grief and tension as part of our love practice is the only way we can create space for ourselves to practice the art of loving outside of the unloving patterns and practices we have been conditioned in.

A kindom kind of love is not drenched in toxic positivity, or gaslighting, or prioritization of profit. Love, like the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, is an outward action affirming our

internal commitments. The way we define, experience, and practice love matters for how not only how we treat ourselves and each other - but how we view and relate to God.

May these questions lead us into deeper and more honest loving:

1. What are you unlearning about the ways you have been taught to love/be loved?
2. Where have you experienced giving/receiving love according to bell hooks' definition [a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect]? What made the conditions for loving possible?
3. What grief and tension do you need to boldly name, like Naomi, to deepen your practice of loving/receiving love? What would it look like to hold grief on a communal level?

These questions will be shared in the chat. Take a few moments to reflect individually before moving into small groups.