

## **Sermon: The Possibility Family**

Scripture reading: Romans 12:9-18

### **Real families**

The Bible is full of stories of families. Honest stories. It doesn't cover up the tales of their terrible tragedies, the mistakes that were made, and the challenging experiences that they faced. Some of the stories are painful and heart-wrenching to read. All of their stories are there to give us comfort, hope and inspiration in our journeys through this sin-damaged world.

The families of the great patriarchs were all broken and imperfect in some way. But God used their brokenness to help them grow, to experience amazing possibilities beyond their imagination, and to learn more about His incredible love and forgiveness.

Adam and Eve experienced the death of one son at the hands of his brother. They knew their own fall had led to this tragedy, but they also experienced God's loving grace and forgiveness for them, and the hope of a Saviour to put things right again.

Abraham and Sarah experienced infertility, an experiment with surrogate parenthood that backfired, and vengeful jealousy in their family unit, before God gifted them their promised child in old age, when everything seemed hopeless and impossible.

Jacob had to flee from his brother to save his life. He was tricked by his father-in-law into marrying a wife he didn't love. His beloved wife died in childbirth. His favorite son was sold into slavery by his brothers and Jacob thought he was dead. But, eventually, Joseph's life story is turned around, and his promotion to being a governor in Egypt creates the unexpected possibility that saves his family in a famine.

King David was been described as a man after God's own heart. But he had many wives and murdered many people. His family was very broken. He had at least one child that died in infancy and his adult children were involved in incest, rape, jealousy, abuse, treason and murder. But God even uses the tragic story of his relationship with Bathsheba to teach him deep lessons about His grace and forgiveness, that he so beautifully expressed for eternity in the words of Psalm 51.

It's quite difficult to think of any family in the Bible that didn't have some kind of serious problem, challenge or serious brokenness. But the families who trusted God, built strong relationships, and used their gifts to bless others, often discovered fresh and creative possibilities in their lives together, whatever challenges life on earth handed them.

### **Every family is a possibility family**

God designed human beings to live in a perfect world, and He would much rather His children didn't have to suffer the countless painful challenges and tragedies that are an inevitable part of life on earth. However, He has an amazing way of helping His children to work through their challenges together in love, discover fresh hope, and use their strengths to turn challenges into possibilities.

There are also many dimensions of God's incredible love that would be hard for us to learn about and experience if we lived in a perfect world. If we lived in perfect families and communities, how would we learn about patience and kindness? Or acceptance and forgiveness? How would we learn to listen to each other's pain, grow in empathy and comfort each other? How would we learn to solve our differences peacefully? Or how would we learn how to encourage and empower each other into new possibilities?

When we face challenges in our close relationships, families and communities, God gives us new opportunities to strengthen our “love muscles” and become more like Him. These experiences help us to open our hearts with generous inclusivity, recognizing that every human being is a beloved child of God, uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit, and designed to be part of a loving and caring community. And, as we live together in love, we discover creative opportunities to help each other grow towards new possibilities.

### **Naomi and Ruth – The story of a possibility family**

Let’s focus more closely on a tiny little family, whose simple story is tucked deep into the very heart of our Bibles and see what we can learn from the way that they managed their challenges and possibilities.

Naomi cradled her new-born grandson. She hugged him close to her heart and kissed his little face, still wrinkled and damp from the birth. But, even as she laughed with the sheer delight of her joy, her soul ached with anguish for the loss of her husband and sons. Once upon a time she dreamed of sharing this moment with them – her sons becoming fathers – and her husband, Elimelech, becoming a grandfather. But although baby Obed would carry the family’s name and inheritance into the future, he was not her flesh and blood. His mother was Ruth, a Moabitess, and his father, Boaz, was the son of Rahab of Jericho. This tiny child contained the mixed heritage of two migrants who had found a warm welcome in the Israelite community of Bethlehem.

Naomi remembered her wedding to Elimelech. She had imagined their future, settled quietly and safely in the tiny town of Bethlehem, surrounded by friends and family. They set up home together, and soon Naomi became pregnant. But, when each of their sons were born, they were weak and fragile. In those days there was no name for their condition, but maybe they had a genetic disorder, like muscular dystrophy, or perhaps something like sickle cell anaemia. Naomi and Elimelech even named them Mahlon (sickness) and Chilion (wasting).

Naomi devoted her life to caring for their sons, and, as she did so, she became even more patient, loving, understanding, kind and unselfish. She was driven by the deep desire to keep them alive long enough to father children of their own. There were many fears and challenges. Naomi often lay awake at night, listening for the sounds of their breathing, ready to run and care for them if they needed her, praying that they would survive.

And then the famine came. The fertile Bethlehem soil crumbled into dust, and Naomi and Elimelech were concerned that their meagre food supplies wouldn’t be enough to nourish their vulnerable children. They made the difficult decision to move away from their home, their family and their friends, and to settle in Moab until the harvests flourished again.

The journey was long and hazardous for the fragile family. They travelled slowly and gently along the route, and into an unknown future. Every bump in the road wracked the boys’ bodies with pain.

Finally, they arrived in the strange town. The boys rested. Elimelech looked for a home and a place to set up his business, and Naomi began to chatter with the women in the Moabite market-place.

Naomi lived up to her name, which meant “pleasant”. She was a warm, cheerful and kind-hearted person. She made friends easily, even here in this foreign place. And as she did so, she looked out for the gentlest and most kind-hearted wives for her delicate sons. Her

deepest desire was that Mahlon and Chilion would bear healthy children who would preserve the family's name and inheritance.

### **Tragedy strikes**

As soon as the boys were old enough to marry, Naomi found Ruth and Orpah, cheerful, kind and loving girls, like herself. But her joy was short lived. Elimelech died, and then the three women watched in desperation as Mahlon and Chilion's fragile health deteriorated too. Naomi did everything she could to keep them alive, but this time it was not enough. Tragedy upon tragedy crashed through her heart. And still no grandsons. Devastated and broken-hearted the three widows comforted each other. They were all alone in the world, with no menfolk to protect them and provide for them.

Naomi decided that life in Bethlehem as widow would be safer than staying in Mab, where she had no male relatives to care for her. As soon as she felt strong enough to travel back to Bethlehem, Naomi packed a few possessions and kissed Ruth and Orpah goodbye. It was so hard to leave them, they were like her own daughters. But she needed to return to her own people, and to her old home, where she could find protection and safety.

### **New possibilities**

Naomi's kindness and faith in God had touches Ruth's heart. When she considers the possibilities of a future as a young widow in Moab, she realizes that moving to Bethlehem to live with her loving mother-in-law is a far better option. So, Ruth commits herself to caring for this amazing woman who has shown her the kindness of God's love.

Naomi pushes open the door of her old home to find it full of dust and dirt. She and Ruth spend a day sweeping, scrubbing and cleaning to make it spotless again. At least now they have some shelter. The next day Ruth lets Naomi rest, and she goes out to find food, picking up the grain stalks that the harvesters leave behind. Ruth doesn't want Naomi to experience the shame of poverty in front of her community. She gleanes in the fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's. He kindly creates a safe space for her to work making sure that she has food to eat during the day, and plenty to take home to Naomi in the evening. He is impressed by her hard work, her courage and her commitment to Naomi, and he willingly accepts his role as her kinsman-redeemer. They are married, Obed is born, and finally Naomi has a child to love who will continue the family line. Obed is fit and healthy. One day he will be the grandfather of King David. If it was true that Naomi and Elimelech's sons carried a genetic condition that would have weakened the family line, then this little love story has found a creative way to heal the damage.

### **A story with familiar themes**

At one level, the story of Ruth is a simple love story with several happy endings, even happier than any of them imagine, as both King David and Jesus will be amongst their descendants. But it also contains many issues faced by families today. There are themes of marriage and widowhood, aloneness and friendship, infertility and motherhood, birth and bereavement, grief and joy, alienation and community, vulnerability and protection, parenting children with health concerns, grandparenting, mentoring the younger generation, caring well for the older generation, setting good moral standards in the workplace, striving for justice, and sharing our blessings generously. So many vital themes are packed into four short chapters of Ruth's story. As we explore this gentle narrative, we discover many ways in which this little family cared for each other through a wide range of

challenging circumstances. Their gentle courage has helped centuries of families to navigate their own unique and challenging journeys and to find their own hopeful possibilities.

### **Paul's "possibility communities"**

We move forward several thousand years to the time of Paul. We find him busily at work, creating loving and inclusive Christ-centered communities, who are working together to discover fresh possibilities. He is planting churches where everyone is to experience the expansive welcome of Jesus, whoever they are, and whatever their gender, age, ethnicity, ability, culture, class, education or family background.

In the twelfth chapter of Romans Paul shares his pocket-sized guide to healthy relationships, families and communities. Naomi and Ruth had learned these important lessons in their lives many centuries earlier, and they are just as relevant to our relationships today. This chapter is clearly divided into three sections with three different principles for living together in healthy, happy, hopeful and loving families and communities. Firstly, everyone in the family of God is different, but connected. Secondly, the Holy Spirit gives a variety of gifts to everyone in the family so that they can bless everyone else. Finally, Paul describes some ways in which communities or families can live together lovingly, and create hopeful possibilities, whatever their unique differences.

### **In "possibility families" everyone is strongly connected**

When Pete was in hospital being treated for COVID-19, his granddaughter sent him a message. "Grandpa, I was so sad that you were in hospital and I couldn't come and see you...but my teacher told me that we are always connected to each other with invisible string called love. So, I am still very close to you, wherever you are, even when I can't see you. And I know you are close to me, too."

Her simple message reminds us what it means for everyone to be included in the family of God. We are all tied together with invisible strings of love, just as all the parts of our human bodies are connected in ways that we can't see. Everyone is included in the body. It doesn't matter what part they play. Every part of our bodies is essential. The tiny or delicate parts of bodies need special care by the other parts, and these vulnerable parts also have a part to play in caring for the rest of the body, and inspiring creativity and hope. Everyone is equally loved, and everyone can bless the others, because we are all joined together with God's invisible, but very powerful, love.

Ruth, Naomi and Boaz also discovered that, even though they were very different, they were all connected and all parts of one body. It didn't matter that Naomi was an Israelite, Ruth was a Moabite, and Boaz's mother was Rahab from Jericho. When Naomi's life was painful, Ruth hurt with her, and when Ruth was filled with joy, Naomi rejoiced too. Boaz noticed that Ruth needed help, care and protection. It didn't matter who she was, or where she came from, or what she could or couldn't do - his responsibility was to bless and care for others as God had blessed and cared for him. He remembered his mother's wonderful stories of the open-hearted ways in which she had been welcomed and included in the Israelite community, and he wanted Ruth to experience the same generous welcome as his mother.

As Christians we are called to build strong, healthy and caring connections with everyone that God brings into our circle of concern – whoever they are, so that we can build inclusive and inspiring communities, empowered by His love.

How is God's love expressed and shared in your family and community? How do each of you include and care for all the other parts of the "body" of Christ? How do you make sure that no one is ever excluded from God's love, for any reason?

### **In "possibility families" everyone is gifted**

In Romans 12:6-8 Paul explains how the Holy Spirit has given us different spiritual gifts. We bless each other in our uniquely gifted ways: by serving joyfully, teaching others about God, encouraging people who are struggling, giving generously and joyfully, being effective leaders, and being kind.

We can see all these gifts being lived out in the story of Ruth. She serves her mother-in-law joyfully by gleaning in the fields. Through her kindness and her conversations Naomi teaches Ruth about the incredible love of God. Ruth comes alongside Naomi and encourages her by promising to stay with her and care for her. Boaz encourages Ruth by letting her glean safely in his fields. He is a generous giver, and he asks his servants to leave extra grain stalks on the ground so that Ruth's work is made easier, and she can gather plenty of grain. Boaz shows himself to be an effective, wise and just leader as he carefully negotiates the position of kinsman-redeemer with a closer relative. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz are all excellent examples of what it means to be kind and merciful to others. In fact, in this little story all the characters who go the second mile to show extra kindness to others receive wonderful and unexpected blessings from God. We can see how each person uses their spiritual gifts to bless the lives of the others.

What are the gifts that the Holy Spirit has given to each person in your family or community? How are you empowering each other to use those gifts, and how are you using them to bless others outside of your community or family?

### **"Possibility families" love each other deeply**

In Romans 12:9-21 Paul lists some very practical suggestions for living out God's love in all of our relationships. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz didn't have the benefit of Paul's letters, but their close connections with their ever-loving God enabled each of them to live out His principles of love. Firstly, they followed the advice in verse 9 to love each other sincerely and to hold on to that which is good. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz loved each other deeply and devotedly. They looked for the good in others, valued it, and held on tightly to each other through their sincere commitment.

What possibilities do you begin to see in others when you look at them through God's infinitely loving lenses, the way Jesus saw the people to whom He ministered, rather than with your own limited and biased vision?

### **"Possibility families" practice kindness**

Then Paul encourages families and communities to be "kindly affectionate" towards each other (verse 10). The story of Ruth is filled with examples of practical kindness. Naomi, Ruth and Boaz showed care and concern for the other's wellbeing. They also discovered that important principle of God's love, that whenever we bless others with our kindness, we are blessed too.

A Christian philanthropist in Scotland was asked what he most wanted to be remembered for. His organisation had funded community orchestras in some of the poorest and most deprived districts and helped to reduce crime and vandalism. He started a program that mentored teenagers from "troubled realities, who had very little hope in life,

and showed them how to be leaders of positive change in their communities. He had adopted a whole family of children. He was the patron of a national charity for building healthy relationships...But his answer was simple and surprising, "If I am to be remembered for anything," he said, "I want to be remembered for being kind."

"And how do you make kindness such a strong value in your life?" asked the interviewer.

"In every situation I ask: 'how can I be kind?' And then I ask myself: 'how I can be even kinder?' And then I do the second thing."

It is this extravagant kindness that we find in the story of Ruth. Ruth walked more than the extra mile for Naomi by committing her whole life to her care. Boaz added generosity to generosity when he provided for Ruth in his fields. And Naomi welcomed Ruth, a migrant from a different culture, into her home as well as her heart.

How can being even kinder than your first thought help to grow creative possibilities in your home and community?

### **"Possibility families" respect each other**

Paul invites us to honor others above ourselves (verse 10). When we treat others with respect, we treat them as God treats us. We show respect to others, when we consider them to be just a little higher than ourselves. Ruth, Naomi and Boaz honored each other above themselves, showing deep respect in all of their different relationships, even though they were different in age, gender, class, ability and culture.

How might your respect for those who are different to you help to create new and creative possibilities in their lives?

### **"Possibility families" are humble, harmonious and hospitable**

Ruth, Naomi and Boaz live their lives together humbly and harmoniously, living out the principles of Paul found in verse 16. They also show generous hospitality to those in need (verses 13). Ruth shows hospitality to Naomi by finding food for them to eat. Boaz welcomes Ruth into the safety of his fields, shares his lunch with her, and then welcomes her into his home as his wife. Ruth lives with Naomi when they arrive in Bethlehem, and Naomi comes to live with Ruth and help with the new baby. Whatever they have, they share it with each other.

How can you live humbly, hospitably and harmoniously with others as you find ways to support and empower each other to explore new possibilities for your lives?

### **"Possibility families" comfort each other and celebrate together**

In Romans 12:15 Paul invites us to be happy with those who are happy and to mourn with those who mourn. When we share in each other's emotions, there is a special kind of connection. Ruth and Naomi comfort each other through their tragic losses and disappointments. And they celebrate together at Ruth and Boaz's wedding and at the joyful birth of baby Obed.

### **Discovering new possibilities together**

God calls all of us to bless and empower everyone else in the circle of our families, friendships, church fellowships and communities – welcoming whoever comes into our lives with joy, generosity and kindness, whatever challenges and differences they bring with them. Each person is a gift from God, filled with countless blessings. Our God-given task is to

come alongside each other, love each other, listen to each other's hopes and dreams, and work together to make them a reality. When Naomi spotted Ruth as a kind young girl in the Moabite market-place she had no idea how God would bless her through Ruth, and eventually mend the brokenness in her own family.

### **Team Hoyt – a possibility family**

Rick and Dick Hoyt have discovered the potential of looking for creative possibilities in the most challenging of circumstances. Rick was injured at birth and he cannot walk or talk. He communicates by typing on a special computer. One day, when he was 15, he wrote that he wanted to participate in a 5-mile run for charity. His dad, Dick, agreed to push his wheelchair around the route. That was the start of an amazing adventure together. It was hard work for Dick to push Rick along the route, but Rick enjoyed the experience so much that Dick was encouraged to get fit and to adapt Rick's wheelchair to make it easier to push at speed. They entered more events and eventually Dick was fit enough to push Rick through marathons and even compete in triathlons. Rick couldn't do this without his dad, Dick, and Dick would never have begun running if it wasn't for Rick. They need each other, and Rick's passion and Dick's energy have powered these new possibilities, beyond anything either of them could ever have imagined. Rick and Dick came alongside each other, loved each other, listened to each other's hopes and dreams, and worked together to make them a reality.

### **Let's be possibility communities!**

This is the kind of "possibility community" that God has designed for us to inhabit. It is the one that Ruth, Naomi and Boaz discovered together, as each of their lives was enriched by the others. One day these three people will also discover their place in the family of Jesus. Today we can also discover our place in God's family, when we find ourselves connected by the invisible strings of love in the body of Christ, each person differently gifted by the Holy Spirit, and putting God's love into action in every relationship. Then we can truly work together to create amazing new possibilities of hope for each person, beyond anything that each of us could have imagined or experienced on our own.

### **Supplementary material - Team Hoyt Video**

<https://www.ignitermedia.com/products/7009-together-team-hoyt-original-version>

This links to a short movie that tells the story of Rick and Dick Hoyt. It can be purchased online for a small fee, and it can be shown at the end of the sermon or during the service if you wish.

Karen Holford is the Family Ministries Director of the Trans-European Division. She is a family therapist with a background in neurological occupational therapy and child psychology. She has been married to Pastor Bernie Holford for 37 years, and they have three adult children, and three young grandchildren.