A trigger warning before I begin, there is one passing mention to sexual assault roughly 2 min in.

Grace, peace, and mercy are yours though our triune God, amen.

What brings me here today is both a stirring in my soul for the church to challenge what is “traditional,” “Biblical,” and “righteous,” and to bring forth some ideas and interpretations that seek to include those on the margins. I fully intend on taking the word “queer” and applying it to the book of Ruth. In the confines of this sermon, more specifically, I’m discussing the queerness of Ruth and Naomi. If you’re like me when I first was introduced to this concept, I said to myself, “That’s incredibly anachronistic, applying queerness to the Old Testament!” What I later learned was that the concept of “queerness” is not new, modern, or dare I say, a “fad.” Queerness has been around since the words, “In the beginning.” And acknowledging our own queerness, or the queerness of those around us, helps us to better understand what it means to be God’s wonderful creation.

I also realize that I’m speaking to a new group of folks, in a new church for me, using weird technology that gives us the illusion of togetherness. I can’t read body language, I can’t really see anybody, so I have to rely a lot on what I don’t see or hear…isn’t that a good word for the times we live in. Since I’m going to be talking about LGBTQ folks, I’d like to make clear what I’m talking about and what I’m not talking about. I imagine this is nothing new for this group, but I want to make sure I’m clear for the safety of everyone.

When we talk about LGBTQ folks, as many of you already know, a common thing we jump to is sex, the act of intercourse. The church has propagated this. Who is having sex with whom, and how, and when? Never mind policing the sex lives of straight folks, let’s focus on a specific group of people, many of whom have been traumatized by church. As a single woman who is 37, I have had to navigate so many questions regarding my relationships and my sex life that are still deeply uncomfortable to me to this day, particularly being a survivor of sexual assault. I am not uncomfortable with this subject matter, my discomfort comes from people who listen only to make assumptions, judge, or who seek to intentionally misunderstand.

My trauma has influenced my sexuality, I know that sounds controversial but it is my truth as I have come to understand it. I don’t usually appreciate anyone challenging me about my own experience. Also, I ask anyone, having an intent of understanding and curiosity, asking me what that means for me sexually! Sexuality is shaped and formed by many things, and just because trauma may have shaped one person doesn’t mean that another person had the exact same experience. In fact, to assume one narrative for a whole group of people is rather insulting, as we all know what it’s like to have people make generalizations about us.

It should also bear mentioning that I have been asked this question, questions about who I’m sexually attracted to, in the context of the act of intercourse. A man asked me about this in a congregation in relation to his self-admitted porn addiction, as if my experience of self after trauma has anything to do with an addiction to a billion-dollar industry when, at its worst, seeks to promote violence and exploitation. I also know that many have reclaimed the industry, but I know that was not what this man was talking with me about. I’ve experienced a lot of offensive things in the Mennonite church as a queer woman of color, but that single-handedly had to be one of the worst things that has been said to me. A person’s demographic has nothing to do with another anything another person is experiencing, and to insinuate as such is reckless and dangerous. While I forgive them, it is my hope that through education, people can do better.

Now that this disclaimer is out of the way, let’s dive into our text for today, Ruth 1: 15-18.

A mess happens right from the start. Elimelek and Naomi experience famine, so they go to Moab. Their two sons marry Moabite women. A thing to note is Moabites were considered to be children of incest cursed by God for being indifferent to the needs of Israel. This story is often told with emphasis to Ruth and Orpah being from “another country.” What not often emphasized is that this is not considered to be a “good” country to be from. Unfortunately, Elimelek dies, and 10 years after that, his two sons die as well, leaving Naomi, Ruth, and Orpha alone in the family.

Word gets out that God was helping people in Judah, so Naomi decides to go back to her hometown. Naomi did what is customary, telling Ruth and Orpha that they have no obligation to her anymore and to go back to their mothers’ homes. Some scholars make a big deal out of Naomi saying “mothers’ house” in particular, and not “fathers’ house.” One scholar says this shows how central and important a mother was to a household.

Now, in the ancient world, Ruth and Orpha still had what it means to have a “chance” in the ancient world. They could go back home, remarry, have children, and resume their lives. For older widows, like Naomi, the only path of survival for them was charity, or for some, they were forced into sex work. Naomi’s future was bleak and possibly nonexistent. Naomi releases these women, telling them that there are no hard feelings, to go and have their own lives, no questions asked. She even reiterates this when Ruth and Orpha protest. It’s almost as if a mother is admonishing a daughter.

Ruth is having none of this. She will not be bossed around by her mother-in-law. She gives the following passionate speech, “coming out” with her love for her mother-in-law with words that will echo through time and eventually be used in many heterosexual marriage ceremonies:

“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. **17**Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

This is one of the closest relationships of any 2 women in the Bible that I have ever encountered. Even the word used before this speech, the one that says she clung to Naomi, that word, cling, is “davak” in Hebrew. That word is also used in Genesis where a man and a woman cling to one another and become one flesh. Realizing how passionate Ruth is, and how she’s not taking no for an answer, she stops entreating her to leave.

This, friends, is super queer.

A common misconception with the word “queer” is that it means all things homosexual in nature. Once considered derogatory, the word “queer” has been reclaimed. Many of us here know this. More often than not, it’s interpreted as a descriptor for people on the LGBTQ spectrum. People can call themselves “queer” for many reasons. Usually it’s an umbrella term, or they feel the words “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” or “transgender” don’t really fit them.

For something to be “queer” means going against the norm. While a synonym for “strange,” being “strange” when it comes to being “anti-establishment” and anti- “how things are done around here” isn’t so much something to be ashamed of in many of our contexts today. In fact, some it’s something for which to be proud. Might we call that pride? Why not reclaim strange? In fact, many Mennonites and Anabaptists, welcome being strange. After all, “in the world but not of it” is in our DNA! We want to be anti-empire, anti-authoritarian, anti-“top down” approach. To be strange in a world that’s following patriarchy, bigotry, racism, well, we want to be strange! We want to be really strange! We all, in a sense, want to be really queer!

The story of Ruth and Naomi is a queer story. I first encountered it in this light when attending the Mennonite-funded Women Doing Theology conference. This was an interesting mix of straight and queer women who had come to their understanding of theology via different channels. There were a number of women who had received their theological training from, self admittedly, straight, European-American men, and others were present who had more diversity in their theological study.

Steph Chandler Burns, a queer theologian, brought the idea to us that there was more significance to this story of Ruth. It was more than a heartwarming tale of loyalty. Some women really balked at the idea of Ruth and Naomi being a queer couple, saying it is anachronistic to view things that way. I can seem so if you have only one definition of the word “queer.” They likely took the meaning to reflect a lesbian couple, interacting with each other in a romantic and sexual way.

While there’s nothing wrong with that interpretation either, that wasn’t the insinuation of Steph. I hesitate to call it “insulting” that the word “queer” should always refer to one’s sexual orientation, mainly because I’ve said that word a lot in this sermon. It can mean sexual orientation, but it’s a word that requires more question and curiosity. I understand the confusion, but I hope that if you take anything from this sermon, it’s that family is complicated, God’s people are complicated, God is complicated, and that something being queer means that it’s subverting the “traditional” (another complicated word that we don’t really know the meaning of) paradigm, not only one’s sexual orientation.

When I was Campus Pastor at Eastern Mennonite University, one of my students was a gay man whose dream it was to create a worship service centering queer voices, particularly queer voices of color, that had previously been marginalized. At the end he gave a benediction saying “May the God who is queering the world go with you!” To be completely honest I kind of lived for the faces of some of the more, and here’s that word again, “traditional” minded folks in the crowd. What my student meant, from my interpretation, I don’t want to put words in his mouth, is that the God who goes with us is the God who turns the world upside down. This is a God who shifts paradigms, brings freedom to captives, lifts up those society has deemed “the least.” This God is indeed queering the world around us. God is doing things that other folks might call “weird.” Another reason to reclaim “weird.”

Ruth and Naomi are proudly displaying their love in the face of a world that has called them worthless. They are unmarried, not virgins, childless, and there’s no space for them, so they’re making a space for each other. The laws and its limits cannot touch this bond they have. There is no law against a widow and her widowed daughter-in-law becoming family. And what really queers this up, friends, is later in the book of Ruth where Boaz joins this whole queer family mix. And eventually, how Jesus’ lineage includes queer family.

This has something do with sexuality a whole lot to do with how those of us who have lost family, either through death, or through lost ties due to discord or abuse, make our own family. And on that note, not being in a sexual relationship with someone does not mean that someone’s life lacks intimacy. Not only are there many ways to be intimate, there many ways to be family.

For me, this concept of having a queer family has been a lifesaver. In 2004 I lost my brother, in 2006 I lost my mom, and in 2019 I lost my dad, which has meant that I’ve lost my entire immediate family. I have never really been connected to other members of my family, so this could have led to a feeling of alone-ness.

As an unmarried woman with no kids at an age that I don’t consider very advanced, but some may consider it so, I’ve lost some station in life. Single people are sometimes told that they’re not good enough, or that there’s something wrong with them, especially as time passes and one remains single. Or maybe, people conclude, they have impossibly high standards. There isn’t much of a place for them in many churches that focus on families…where families sit together, have activities directed towards them, especially families with 2 parents. There isn’t always space for married people without children in the church, either. For some, not having children is a choice, and for others, it’s not.

When the definition of family is 2 parents and children, these people are often left out, or told insensitive things like “You’ll change your mind,” or “One day.” As for single parents, not only is your role a huge job to begin with, the church often makes plans and assumptions based on children having 2 parents in the household. Not everyone has someone who can stay at home with their kids while single parents participate in the adult life of the church, be it committee meetings or Bible studies. This whole concept of a “traditional” family being the only “legitimate” type of family is hurtful for everyone, not just for those who queer the norm.

My life is very rich, and I’d say it’s the richest it’s ever been. I’ve had a group of 9 friends whom I met at Goshen College that I’m still in touch with, almost every day. We’ve been a lifeline to one another. We have a group text going, we have Marco Polo, an app that records videos of you and sends them to friends, and we have our annual gathering in Michigan City, Indiana, which I just got back from yesterday. Not all of us can make it every year, but we use technology to have us connect during that time in some way. Some of us are married without children, some of us are married with children, some of us are in romantic relationships, and some of us are not. There is a recognition that no one person’s way of being in the world is “better” or “more accepted” than another and that gives me such a sense of community and family.

One person in this group is my best friend. We reconnected as best friends around 2014, while she was going back to school for nursing and I was working in the wild, wild west of social work in Washington, DC. When I moved back to this area to pastor, we moved in together. I was really nervous because even the best of relationships have broken up over this sometimes fatal mistake.

In our case, it only made our friendship stronger. We started off being very particular about what in the apartment was “mine” and what was “hers,” only to forgo that entirely when we weren’t planning on moving on any time soon. We function as a household, as a family. While we have our own bank accounts, we share many things equally. While I own the house we live in, we share it together. We go to different churches, but we’re both Mennonite. We both sing alto, but I yield to her when we sing together and take the melody because every relationship has sacrifices. We even owned a dog together. She is my best soul friend. It sometimes takes a lot of explaining to emphasize this is not a romantic coupling. That’s the easy way to explain having ties. Either you’re friends or you have sex together. What people sometimes fail to see is the nuance of intimacy and closeness in between. And no, not everyone who has a relationship like this is repressing romantic feelings for one another. We simply love each other and have chosen to cling to one another, not completely unlike Naomi and Ruth.

The queerness doesn’t end there. Many friends are my siblings. To be honest, the ones I’m closest to are single in the way that I am. Family is far away for them, or they’ve limited ties for their own well-being. I love them, get annoyed with them, and do all that unhealthy triangling stuff that we all want to think we’re above but do anyway…they’re my support and my cheerleaders, and I am that for them, as well.

I have an auxiliary mom, or maybe I best call her “mom at large.” She’s old enough to be my mother, and we’re friends, but it would not be truthful to deny there’s a bit of mothering and daughtering happening. Since there is a lot of baggage associated with the word “mother” for me due to childhood trauma, I do not see her as “my mom” or some type of mom replacement. She’s one of my closest friends but when it comes to being a mom, she’s on the sidelines, filling in the role a little bit at the appropriate times. We shop together, bake together, I ask her for advice, we text every day, and sometimes we drink coffee and chat for hours. There are some things I don’t talk with her about and there are other boundaries, just like with any adult child. Recently, I allowed her to hem my pants that were way too long for me. That, for some reason, was a huge mental leap for me, but when I think of the concept of how we all have different families, I was ok with her filling in that role.

I have explained for you how I have made my own queer family, but I know you all have stories of your own or stories of loved ones who have had to make a patchwork quilt of family for themselves, a big old comforter to wrap around yourself when life’s wind makes you freeze. Maybe this is something you are in the process of doing for yourself, to which I say, open your heart and mind and think of the roles in your life you would want filled. God will bring the right people in your path and give you wisdom and discernment.

Today I highlighted one story of many of how God’s people have queered their lives and the world around them. How our laws and traditions bind us in ways that are sometimes unhelpful, and that our intentional shaking up of a system that excludes into a system that includes. There is no one or right way to be family, and the Bible is God’s really long memoir that includes all different ways to be in relationship with one another.

As you seek to learn and understand what it means to queer something, and what it means to be a part of the LGBTQ community, openness is the best ministry you can give one another. Allow yourself to be a person adopted into a queer family. Open your family life to a person in need of connection. Honor the sexuality of others who are different from you. Get curious instead of making assumptions. Honor others who have chosen a different journey than you. Honor your own journey.

And just as Ruth clung to Naomi, we cling to God, our Parent, Sibling, Friend, and Lover who has made us in their image and desires for us to have connection, both to them and to one another. May we open our hearts to see what the Divine has for us. Amen.