

Our Holy Habits: Radical Friendship

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- [0 : 0 0] If you will, please pray with me. Oh, Lord, thank you for the gift of laughter. Thank you for this community in which your good news has already been proclaimed.
- The good news that for those of us who have entered this place mired in struggle, that the kingdom is ours. The good news that you love gratuitously.
- You love what a stranger seems outside. You love the dappled beauty. The good news that you bring resurrection over and over again through your son to our lives.
- So, Lord, as I stand here today, I pray that good news would again be found. As we leave this place later and talk to one another, I pray that we would hear good news proclaimed on each other's lips.
- Lord, we long for you. Fill us, hold us, and help us to know you in our hearts this day.
- [1 : 1 8] In Jesus' name, amen. All right. So today we are beginning a new sermon series which always feels exciting for me.
- For the next five weeks, we'll be taking each Sunday evening to explore our identity as a church. We'll talk about what grounds us.
- We'll talk about what we're passionate about. We'll talk about what we want to ultimately practice together. And underneath all of that, I hope that you sense really two questions.
- And that is, what is the world that we are invited to build together? And then, what are the values that we need to embody to lean into that kind of world?
- If what the activist, Adrienne Marie Brown says, is actually true, that small is all, what is the rhythm of this everyday life together that we need in order to build the kind of fabric of community that spills out abundantly and deeply and brings God joy?
- [2 : 4 4] We're calling the series, you might have, there it is, Our Holy Habits. Because defining our values is about this increasing desire for maturity as Christians, for holiness.
- But it's also about what is the source material for us to become whole as human beings. These are ways of being we want to lean into, rhythms of life.
- And what I love is that they are ours, and they, I hope, can become habits for us in this season. Now, in thinking about this series, one thing kept coming up for me over and over again.
- One way of talking about directing the spiritual life. And that ancient way is called the rule of life. I did a little class on this earlier in the year.
- The rule of life, or the rule for short. The early Christians who fled into the desert to escape the corruption of empire realized that they needed some kind of guide to their common life together.
- [4 : 0 6] Practices that could help them understand what direction they were growing in or not growing in. And when I think about these ancient rules, and when I look at them, things like the Benedictines' commitment as a community to practice daily manual labor, to work with their hands.

That same community, their rule, their practice of holy leisure. Those are the kinds of detailed things I think about that undergird good values.

They help us cultivate growth in specific areas. And then what I also most like about the idea of the rule, the rule of life, is that the word rule itself goes to the word trellis in Latin and Greek.

Trellis. Now for me, I am not a gardener. So I often think of trellis in pretty self-centered ways. I think about a trellis as a, you know, kind of whimsical addition to a garden.

Or maybe I think about it as a place where I can, you know, get a little shade on a hot D.C. day. Or maybe a place that, you know, where people are married. But the first purpose of a trellis is actually to support growth.

[5 : 36] It's a structure that is all about providing boundaries and pathways toward the light.

It's about ensuring fruitfulness. And then the really wonderful thing is that while trellises give structure and provide boundaries, they also allow a ton of possibilities for growth.

There's a ton of freedom in the details for which direction plants can move in as long as they lean on that structure. So I think in many ways, these holy habits that we're going to be talking about for this next few weeks are kind of a community trellis.

And these are holy values, holy habits that have been discerned for this season. They are radical friendship, which is the one I'm going to talk about today.

Revolutionary justice. Relentless curiosity. Restorative play. And rooted improvisation. And then I should say one other thing for the sake of clarity and the sake of transparency about where these values came from.

[7 : 06] When Resurrection City and the Table Church agreed to merge, one of the desires from the side of Resurrection City was for these two communities to spend some time discerning their shared mission and vision and values.

What does that look like for this community? And then at the same time, the leadership of the Table Church realized that at about 10 years, they were at the point in their life cycle where it made sense to do some discerning of where we are around values.

So the leaders of those two communities and then later the joint elder board of those two communities, of this one community now, spent over a year meeting.

Now one thing Anthony and I often talk about is we sometimes under-communicate. So I know you may not have realized that for a year, the leaders in this community have been meeting and discerning these values.

And these aren't values that just kind of hang out there suspended. They're values that came from us asking about what is the spirit doing in this specific place?

[8 : 23] We spend a ton of time just like sharing stories and dreams and thinking about what is the language that keeps coming up among us? What are the kinds of things we hear that people need like over and over and over again?

What are the dreams that keep bubbling to the surface? So today, I want to just talk a little bit about our first value, radical friendship.

And this one is about the ways in which we need to draw into the habits of friendship with God, with other people, with ourselves, and with all of creation.

Deep friendships along each of these dimensions are fundamentally radical because they have the potential to transform us down to the roots.

That's what radical means. It means back to the roots. And they're also wildly countercultural. Deep friendship. And that word radical is also important and shouldn't also be passed up.

[9 : 33] Because when we talk about friendship, we've also got to talk beyond individual relationships. Friendship is this basic way of interacting and posturing yourself toward the world.

The basic attitude of the heart of the Trinity is one of friendship that spills over an incarnational presence.

Through the Spirit and the Son. Friendship, author Kate Johnson says, is a fundamental attitude of the heart and mind.

And there's a fundamental attitude with which we can navigate the world around us. Friendship is an inner fulcrum upon which all of our actions can reliably hinge. A compass to offer us a direction when we're lost.

And a shield to protect us. And there's a ton I could say about this holy habit. But today, I really want to focus on the dimension of friendship that has to do with others.

[10 : 44] I know that many of you sitting here, maybe watching online, I often talk to you about struggles in your faith and your friendship with God. And we talked some about that in the fall when we did a series, Practicing Resurrection.

Which I think Anthony, Pastor Anthony, you know, lovingly named my relationship with God. No, my theology is great. My relationship with God sucks. So we're always going to be talking about that as a community, our friendship with God.

But as your pastor, the other thing that I keep noticing is that as I have one-on-ones with people, that many of us in this room, in this community, in this church, struggle in terms of our pursuit of friendship with others.

Over and over, I talk to people who have this sense of disconnection. The sense of loneliness that haunts the everyday.

And especially loneliness that haunts the faith journey. A sense that we can't be our full selves around other people.

[11 : 55] People can't share, like, our secrets and what we believe and what we really think about things. And I know that as people begin to return to our community from summer adventures, I'm thinking a lot about that felt sense of loneliness that some of you might be moving through yet again.

And still, I believe that this first value of radical friendship is good news. So to discover that good news, what I want to do is take a few minutes to go to the book of Ruth.

I don't know if Ruth was your devotional this morning, but we're going to Ruth. Ruth 1. We don't always go there. And what I'm going to do is actually read the entire first chapter.

I'm going to do it both to absorb details, to lift up text, and to invite you, yes, yes, yes, to read Ruth this week. Yes, because it's so good. It's only four chapters.

Plug for Ruth. Okay. So stay with me. Feel free to, you know, look this up on your phone. I'm going to be referring to it for the rest of this time.

[13 : 07] So Ruth chapter 1. In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem and Judah went to live in the country of Moab.

He and his wife and two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech. And the name of his wife, Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Malon and Kilion.

They were Aetherithites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died and she was left with her two sons.

These took Moabite wives. The name of one was Orpah and the name of the other was Ruth. When they had lived there for about ten years, both Malon and Kilion also died.

So that the woman was left without her two sons or her husband. Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab.

[14 : 13] For she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had had consideration for his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, Go back, each of you, to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you as you have dealt with the dead and with me.

The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you, in the house of your husband. Then she kissed them and they wept aloud. They said to her, No, we will return with you to your people.

But Naomi said, Turn back, my daughters. Why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters.

Go your way. For I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown?

[15 : 22] Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters. It has been far more bitter for me than for you because the hand of the Lord has turned against me. Then they wept aloud.

Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods.

Return after your sister-in-law. But Ruth said, Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you. Where you go, I will go.

Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die. There I will be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me and more as well. If even death parts me from you. When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

[16 : 24] So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them. And the women said, Is this Naomi?

Naomi? She said to them, Call me no longer Naomi. Call me Mara. For the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.

Why call me Naomi? When the Lord has dealt harshly with me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me. So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came with her from the country of Moab.

They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest. Now, there are a few different places in Scripture that I thought about selecting to explore the idea of radical friendship with others.

One of the portions of Scripture we could mine for weeks comes in the story of the love between David and Jonathan in 1 Samuel 18. The story ranges over 14 chapters and begins with these extraordinary words.

[17 : 42] After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one spirit with David and he loved him as himself. Radical friendship. We could also mine for weeks the stories of friendship between Jesus and the disciples that we find in the Gospels.

If you never thought of the disciples as true friends of Jesus, consider this. That on the evening that Jesus enters into the Garden of Gethsemane, when he's utterly weighed down by the prospect of his impending death, he asked the disciples to keep watch with him.

In perhaps the hardest and most important moment of his life up until that point, Jesus doesn't long just for the friendship of God, of the Father.

He also asked for the presence of his friends to engage in the darkest valley. So we're going to, I love this value because there's so much here, there's so much time, there's so much to mine.

And yet today, today, I want to stay with the book of Ruth because I think it has something really specific to tell us in this season. It emerges from this perspective, not of the wealthy male in the story, Boaz, right?

[19 : 07] He's this incredibly wealthy character that comes in chapter two, if you've ever read it. But it comes from the perspective of these destitute women, Naomi and Ruth. And I don't know about you, but when I think about the culture of women, the ways of relating that have been cultivated for millennia by women, both because of and in spite of imposed powerlessness, I think that the story of women often has something to teach the church needs.

An amen, maybe? Amen? Come on now, something now. Come on now, talking about women. Okay. Another thing I just want to point out to frame this is that the beginning of the story takes place, as the first line says, in the days when the judges ruled, placing it in relation to this book of judges that comes right before it.

The line that's repeated over and over in Judges for effect is, the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Those words encompass the cycle of sin that the characters and judges are caught up in.

The last chapters even describe the brutal murder of an unnamed woman and then the murder of dozens of people because of really the logic of patriarchy. And then the book of Ruth comes right after it, providing the sharp counterpoint to the book of Judges, outlining an alternative vision of what it is to be a community of care grounded in friendship.

The book of Ruth begins immediately with a series of problems. I hope you noticed these as you heard this read.

[21 : 00] The family highlighted at the beginning of the book is facing famine. They travel to this foreign country to resolve that issue, but then they encounter these worse issues. The patriarch of the family dies first.

The matriarch of the family, Naomi, continues to live in the land and her two sons take wives, but then those two sons also die. There will be no one to carry forward the family name, which in the biblical world is paramount.

And these three women, Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah, are plunged into poverty in society where they basically had no rights and definitely didn't have the right of protection or provision.

There's grief and emptiness that pervades the beginning of this story. By the end of chapter one, Naomi longs to be known.

Naomi, who is known, her name means pleasant. She longs to be known as bitter, Mara, because that's how she feels. That's how she experiences the world.

[22 : 08] She lives in this world of irony. Naomi. Her family is from Bethlehem, which means house of bread. And yet it was a lack of food that's her undoing.

Her clan is known as the Aetherthites, which is tied to the word fruitful, yet barrenness colors the experience of her world. Even when Ruth resolves to continue on Naomi's journey, Naomi, I don't know if you noticed this, but Naomi only like grudgingly accepts her company.

She's like silent. She's like, I guess if you're coming with me, all right, I just want to be left to myself. There's this sense that because of her past pain and spiritual hurt that she would prefer a life of isolation, even if that life will ultimately lead to her demise.

I think this story is important for many of us right now, because I think that many of us are like Ruth. We've been awakened to the profound ironies of the world in painful ways.

By deaths of loved ones, by feelings of emptiness and despair and anger at God, but also by experiencing people who claim to love us but in reality denied us what we most needed.

[23 : 40] By submitting to church leaders and theologies that caused us trauma. By paying the steep price of cultural assimilation only to realize later that belonging was not actually on the other end of that transaction.

by engaging church communities that claim to offer friendship and connection only to receive surveillance and control in exchange for our trust.

And because we know the painful ironies of the world, sometimes we are slow to allow other people to join our journeys, to share intimacy with us.

We might have, you know, a number of friends from earlier in our lives, but we are unsure how to keep making friends in this season of our life.

Radical friends, deep, deep, genuine soul friends. Like Naomi, we don't often know how to ask for help even when we deeply, deeply need it, making the vulnerability of friendship impossible.

[25 : 01] We engage in toxic individualism which cuts us off from the deepest forms of connection. As Mia Birdsong says so well, when we are oriented toward doing it ourselves and getting ours, we cut ourselves off from the kinds of relationships that can only be built when we allow ourselves to be open and generous.

Yet, what interrupts the downward spiral of Naomi is Ruth's decision to turn, to intentionally and wholeheartedly turn toward Naomi to join her journey.

She says the famous words that we often use in marriage ceremonies, do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you. Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge.

Ruth clings, clings to Naomi in a way that's reminiscent of Genesis 2's description of a man leaving his wife and becoming one flesh with his wife.

leaving his family and becoming one flesh with his wife. And, what I love too is that Ruth does all this with no really expectation it seems of reward.

[26 : 21] She's joining a completely destitute older woman. Like Abram in Genesis, she decides she's going to set out on this journey to an unknown land and unknown people.

But unlike him, she does not have any promise. because of Ruth's decision to turn to Naomi wholeheartedly, to even see herself with this altered identity, everything changes for the two of these women.

Later in the book, if you keep reading chapter two, Ruth ends up providing food for both of them by gleaning, which is gathering leftovers in the fields of other people. in chapter three, Naomi suggests a plan for Ruth by connecting her to their kinsman redeemer, this person who could help them find their way back into protection.

And in the final chapter of the book ends with complete reversal. Because of that plan, Ruth is now married, she has a child, instead of famine, there is abundant food, and harvest, and instead of emptiness, there is this sense of fullness.

Naomi ends in this image of her cradling her grandchild, which is this way in the ancient world of talking about fullness and abundance. The joy of pursuing radical friendships with others is they create nourishment and fruitfulness for us and for the world.

[27 : 54] And honestly, the church, in my estimation, is just a network, or should be, I hope, a network of these kinds of radical friendships, of us joining each other's journeys, of us turning to each other in ways that are wholehearted, in ways that are countercultural.

But what is a Christian, what is a radical friendship in a Christian community? Psychologist David Benner gives us one of the best definitions I know. I'm going to read this and hope we can take this with us well.

A soul friendship, what I'm calling radical friendship, is a relationship to which I bring my whole self, especially my inner self. And the care that I offer for the other person in a soul friendship is care for his or her whole self, especially the inner self.

Soul friends seek to safeguard each other's uniqueness and nurture the growth of each other's inner self. They seek to meet each other as whole people and help each other become whole people.

They offer each other the gift of sacred accompaniment on the human journey. All right, y'all. So at this point, I'm going to cheat a little bit because I see the time.

[29 : 15] So I'm going to do what Bridget was not supposed to do. I'm going to leave you with a little bit of a cliffhanger because I got really into this topic and we will be here all night, all right? You know, I introduced the series.

I hope that this week you read this text. But I want to talk some more about the details of what I think radical friendship looks like. So I don't know.

There's going to be a podcast this week or a part two next week. I don't know. But there's so much more I want to say here. But there is something I do want to at least leave you with.

because I think that there is good news in this text. I know that as I described earlier in the sermon, Naomi's life, her situation full of bitterness and irony and pain, that some of you did not relate to that at all.

I know that many of you have deeply fulfilling spiritual relationships, that you have deeply compelling and meaningful relationships with Jesus. As your pastor, alongside those stories of pain and isolation, I also hear stories in this community of fullness.

[30 : 31] The name Ruth means fullness. It means refreshment or saturation. And some of you, I believe, are closeted Ruths.

You hear God's voice. You open your Bible and you're like, yes, Lord, yes, you. You're praising the Lord in your house. And you have this sense of joy and this sense of abundance.

And in this room, there are Naomi's and there are Ruth's and there are folks in between. But the good news is that God has provided us for each other. Radical friendship.

Ruth and Naomi have to stand in this community beside each other and connect in order for the fullness of God's beauty to saturate our journeys.

One facet of all that amazing news in the book of Ruth is that these two women redeem each other. Boaz plays a key role as kinsman redeemer and Obed, the son of Ruth, is also a redeemer in the story.

[31 : 40] But it's actually also Naomi and Ruth that provide the ground for the redemption in the entire story through their radical friendship.

It's an uncovering of fruitfulness and abundance through their connection. And my deepest desire for this church is that we would lean into this kind of radical friendship.

Amen.