



The Episcopal Community

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Spiritual Formation Study

The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life

by Joan Chittister

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Ruth and Naomi: Your Story and Mine

Have you read the book of Ruth before? It is only four chapters long, so now is a good time to read or re-read the book in its entirety before delving into the specific chapters.

1. Chittister calls the book of Ruth “an icon of what it means to be a woman of God” (1a). In the Christian tradition, icons are visual symbols that focus our attention to greater, more abstract ideas. As we begin each chapter, consider spending a few moments in contemplation of the lovely illustrations that supplement this book.
2. Do you think you would be more like Orpah—“the sensible one,” or Ruth “the bold” one (3ab)? Why?
3. Clearly, Ruth’s decision is lifted up in this book. Does that mean there is anything wrong with being sensible and practical? Why?
4. Do you agree that “women live in two worlds—one private, one public” (4a)? How have you felt this tension in your own life? How have you ever been called to live in both?

Chapter One: Loss

1. How have you experienced great loss in your life, as opposed to “great misfortune” (10a)—the kind of loss that changes life at its root?
2. How have changes or losses in your life ever “thrown [you] back on [your] own assets (9a),” forcing you to “trust in the fullness of [your] own creation (9a)?
3. Many life events (moving, changing jobs, giving birth to a child, losing a child) cause us to ask the question: “Who am I when I am no longer who and what I was?” (9b). How has this happened in your own life?
4. Have you ever had to answer this question for yourself? Have you ultimately experienced the gift that can accompany loss, the discovery that “There is more of God in me...than I have ever known in what I once took to be fullness” (11ab)? What wealth did you discover within? What new beginnings were awakened?
5. Do you think that loss is inevitable in our lives? Why?

Chapter Two: Change

1. What do you consider the difference between “change” and “loss”?

2. In the mosaic of your life, what pieces have shifted or been removed over the years? How has this changed the overall picture?
3. Chittister quoted this Sufi saying, "Willed change is not real. Only unwilled change is real" (18a). When have you experienced change willingly? When have you experienced change unwillingly? How did you feel "the stretching of the self beyond the self" (18a)?
4. Have you ever known someone who could not negotiate change in his/her life? What boundaries against change do we build in our own lives?
5. The illustration for this chapter shows Ruth and Naomi walking in the foreground, while Orpah returns home, disappearing into the distance in the opposite direction. Where are you in this picture? Why?

Chapter Three: Transformation

1. What is your relationship like with your mother-in-law, if you have one? Why do you think Ruth values her relationship with Naomi so highly?
2. How have loss or change in your life led to transformation? When have you awakened to realize that "yesterday is no longer the measure of our meaning, the height of our contentment, the standard of the self" (23a), that you have outgrown your present circumstances?
3. When have you found yourself "in the throes of spiritual babel" (25a) when no voice is clear and no answer is easy?
4. When have you followed everyone else's rules at the expense of being completely yourself? How has your life been more of a "well-worn path" or a "reeling spinning whirligig" (25b)?
5. Re-read the paragraph on pages 25-26 that begins: "Ruth has clearly changed her mind." How have you experienced this moment of growing into yourself, becoming a "spiritual adult," (26a) making your own decisions?

Chapter Four: Aging

1. What women have mentored you, have "showed [you] the God of becomings... showed [you] that life is to be shaped, not simply endured"(31)?
2. When have you felt the desperation that can accompany getting older, that it is "time to dye the hair and buy the anti-wrinkle creams (31)?
3. How much of your personal sense of value had been connected to your physical self and/or ability to bear children?
4. How have you found age to be "the reservoir of our life lessons, the harvest of faith" (33a) either in yourself or others?
5. Chittister says, "...we have not asked women nearly often enough, perhaps, what the strengths that are menopause brings to women (34a).'" Now that we are finally being asked, how would you answer?
6. If you could share one pearl of wisdom with women younger than yourself, what would it be?

Chapter Five: Independence

1. How can you be described as someone with an independent streak?

2. How have you found yourself on the see-saw between self-centeredness and God-centeredness, balancing between being “your own compass” and letting God guide you (39b)?
3. When have you gone, like Ruth, into “a foreign field” encountering a system that is not friendly to women and their needs (42a)? How was it worth it?
4. What undertakings in your life have been, like Ruth’s gleaning, a matter of survival but also something giving you a sense of “moral presence, spiritual agency, in the larger world” (42b)?

Chapter Six: Respect

1. “Ruth carries the dignity of creation within her and brings everyone around her to see it, too” (47a). Who have you known who possessed this quality? How did this person affect your life?
2. Chittister offers a challenging point about the “gain of place without benefit of respect” for women and other minorities in established institutions. (47b-48a) Have you or other women you know sacrificed truth so as not to rock the boat, to be seen as a “nice” feminist (48a) ?
3. What do consider the difference between “reverence” and “respect” to be (48a)? What lessons—spoken or unspoken—have you been taught about reverence and what “a women’s place” is (48a)?
4. Who in your life has truly respected you—heard you, valued you, sought your opinion?

Chapter Seven: Recognition

1. Chittister writes that “invisibility has been made into a virtue as well as a social role for a woman” (53b). As a woman, how have you been encouraged to be invisible?
2. Recall a moment in your life when you were recognized—when your work, your efforts, your life were noticed (53b). What did that feel like?
3. Recall a moment in your life when you went unrecognized for your efforts. How did that feel?
4. Have you thought of your work as “a reflection of the divine in [you]” (55b), as sharing in God’s creative spirit? Have you thought of recognizing others’ work as affirming this in them?

Chapter Eight: Insight

1. When, if ever, did you come to understand “that all men are not worthy of [you] simply because they are attracted to [you] (59a)?
2. Can you remember specific moments in your childhood or adulthood when your freedom was diminished by “a sex-defined system” (59a)?
3. What men have you known in your life who are spiritually whole, not just male, macho, or masculine?
4. What men in your life have treated you with justice and respect, truly honoring your womanhood?
5. How do you think we counteract cultural, systemic messages that diminish both manhood and womanhood?

Chapter Nine: Empowerment

1. What women in the generation ahead have formed you?
2. What women in the next generation have you helped form?
3. As Naomi did, have you ever adopted a younger woman as a “daughter” (68a)?
4. What risks have you taken in your time to make the world better for women who come after you?
5. Have you ever refrained from revealing the God you know because you were fearful of rocking the boat? How have you chosen to “make no judgment on [your] own [life]” (70a), thereby neglecting to question assumptions or name injustice?

Chapter Ten: Self-Definition

1. Have you ever thought about the differences between “femaleness” and “womanliness” (75b)? How would you distinguish between them?
2. How have you ever been made to feel that sexuality is your primary value as a woman?
3. Re-read the paragraph that begins at the end of page 76 and continues on page 77; perhaps even read it aloud with the group. Have you been the victim of any of these or other systems of injustice?
4. When have you relied on God to save you, to perform a “magic act”? When have you relied on God as the essence of love, rather than a magician (77b)?
5. When have you taken life into your own hands, deciding to become an instrument of God in your own life or someone else’s? Did you discover that “we all have in ourselves everything we need to reconfigure the pierces of our soul” (77b)?

Chapter Eleven: Invisibility

1. When, if ever, have you stood “at the mercy of a system of which [you] are not a participating part (81a)?
2. Who or what in your life has made you feel invisible?
3. Read Deuteronomy 25:5-10 which explains the Israelite custom of levirate marriage. How does Boaz’s action reflect this custom and how does it alter it?
4. Do you fault Boaz for manipulating the system but not trying to change it?
5. When have you felt the virtue of “holy anger” (82a)?
6. Have you or women you know “accepted invisibility” (83b)?
7. What larger meaning is proclaimed when most of our religious language is male? How can we influence or change that message?

Chapter Twelve: Fulfillment

1. When have you “come home to [your] self” (87a)?
2. Have you watched men in your life become “loosed from the delusion of male superiority” (87a)?
3. When have you been able to see in men (or women) you know “other aspects of God’s image, aspects they themselves cannot reflect” (87b)?
4. Discuss the one time God is portrayed as a character with agency in this story (86, 88a).
5. Have you known a Ruth (89b)? A Naomi? What did these women do to be like Ruth or Naomi?

6. Chittister asks, “What is Ruth’s story saying to us, here and now, about the place of God, the will of God, in a women’s life? In my life” (90a)? Where are you in this story, what part is especially for you?
7. Chittister ends this book with, “It is a book to be written into every woman’s—every man’s—spiritual life. And the story is incomplete until every woman writes the rest of it herself” (90b). How do you hope your life will complete this story?

Study Guide adapted from questions written by The Rev. Rebecca Edwards, Good Samaritan Episcopal Church, San Diego CA; used with her permission with our many thanks.