



Newcastle Unitarians
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Hello

Updates on what's happening at Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians – November

Here's the service summary letter from Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians for November 2021.

As you know, at present we're not able to gather in person, as the central heating at our church building is not working, and hence we've moved our services to Zoom until spring 2022.

We are looking at the possibility of using a smaller room on the ground floor of the church with a screen and projector to show the online services, so that people who are not on Zoom to join in services. Having a smaller number of people in a smaller room will hopefully make it feasible to both safely heat the space, and keep it properly ventilated whilst maintaining social distancing.

This will be in the New Year as we need the electrical inspections to be complete before we can do this! We will also keep in touch with everyone by phone calls and letters, and I will keep everyone informed about what's happening. I'll be sending out these letters summarising what's happening with services and other aspects of our community life, and offering excerpts from services which I hope you will find interesting.

If you want to get in touch, please call on: 07506 255 731, I'm happy to discuss things anytime.

In fellowship,

Louise Reeve
Chairperson, Newcastle upon Tyne Unitarians

November Service Highlights

7th November – Rev. Robin Hanford and ‘Biblically Queer: The Story of Ruth and Naomi’

One of our newest Unitarian Ministers, Rev. Robin Hanford introduced a new perspective on the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi. Here’s his address:

“Our first reading today comes from the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible. Usually, when I preach on a Biblical text, I like to provide an approximate date of when it was written. However, like many details of this book, even that is contested. It could have been within the second Temple period, or written during the reign of King David.

This sets the scene for Ruth very well. This text defies attempts to definitively date it just as much as it defies attempts to impose any one way of reading it upon the text itself. I have heard Ruth read as a story of solidarity and sisterhood as well as a story of one woman selling out another, a story of queer liberation, and a story obsessed with patriarchal laws and customs.

As with many preachers, however, I do like to believe that all these possible contradictory readings offer support for how I like to read the text. I contend that only a uniquely queer text can resist definitive interpretation like the Book of Ruth can. As this is the case, I think it makes sense to read it through a queer lens.

As stated at the beginning of our reading today – Naomi is Ruth’s mother-in-law. Before this point in the story, she has left Bethlehem to seek a life in the Kingdom of Moab with her husband and two sons. They settle in Moab, and her sons find wives in Moab. Unfortunately, things do not continue to go well. Naomi’s husband dies followed by her two sons. This leaves her with her two daughters-in-law. Naomi realises that the only thing she can do is head back to Bethlehem but she doesn’t want to take her two daughters-in-law.

The reason for this is likely because they would both be extremely vulnerable in Naomi’s homeland. Women – especially those without a husband or a father nearby – were not treated well in the ancient Near East. On top of this Judah the country Bethlehem was in at the time, suffered from widespread xenophobia. Foreigners were not often looked on kindly. Naomi begs her daughters-in-law to stay behind and not follow her back home. She manages to convince one but not the other. Ruth is determined to stay with her.

What follows is one of the most beautiful declarations of love in the biblical canon, as Ruth states to Naomi that:

“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 will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”

Ruth 1:16-17

These poetic lines have been commonly read at church weddings for hundreds of years as they were deemed to exemplify the holy love a husband and wife should aspire to share. It seemingly did not bother church authorities that these words were first spoken from one woman to another! Indeed, as Ruth says these words, she is described as “clinging” to Naomi. This same word in Hebrew is used in Genesis to describe how a man leaves his mother and father “clings” to his wife in order to become one flesh. This has led some Biblical scholars to speculate that there might be a romantic relationship between the two women.

When they get back to Bethlehem in Judah, Naomi is still emotionally broken. It is so painful to her having to return empty handed to her town of origin that she even changes her name from ‘Naomi’ (meaning pleasant) to ‘Mara’ (meaning bitter). Yet they do have a little good fortune – they have arrived at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Arriving at this time brings good news: Ruth, as a poor foreigner, is allowed under the law to glean. Gleaning is when one walks behind the agricultural workers who are reaping and gathering in the harvest and you take any little bits of grain that are left on the ground for yourself. This strategy for survival comes with its own dangers and drawbacks. Gleaning is back breaking work for very little gain. Also, being surrounded by male agricultural workers in a remote setting would have been a dangerous environment for a woman such as Ruth to be in.

Yet she bravely persists with this strategy and catches the attention of Boaz. Ruth doesn’t know it yet, but we know from our reading today that Boaz turns out to be a relative of Naomi and, therefore, has a legal option to marry Ruth and gain a small slice of land that Naomi’s family left behind when they went away. He is impressed by Ruth’s boldness and is markedly less xenophobic than many of his contemporaries. Boaz proceeds to order his workers not to

harass Ruth in any way and to leave extra grain for her to gather. It is when Ruth gets home to Naomi that she is informed of Boaz's relation to her.

Finally, we get to where our reading today began. Naomi knows that the gleaning season does not last forever and a more permanent solution for her and Ruth's precarious position must be found. So she comes up with a plan and tells Ruth to, "Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes [...] When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

Now if you are thinking that getting dressed up, putting on perfume, and lying down with somebody on a pile of grain alone together sounds like a plan for seduction, then you might well be right. The Hebrew is slightly more on the nose, as "feet" in this context ("uncover his feet and lie down") would have been an obvious anatomical euphemism.

This act swiftly leads to Ruth proposing to Boaz, and after a brief legal issue of another man being found who is a slightly closer relation to Naomi than Boaz is resolved, Ruth marries Boaz with the blessing of the local community. However, the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is far from dissolved. Naomi is clearly hands on enough with Ruth and Boaz's child that the community recognise it as Naomi's.

It is no wonder then that in many years of doing ministry within the LGBT community, I have encountered many people for whom this is the Bible story that they feel most seen in. A great expression of love from one woman to another and a happy ending involving an atypical, maybe even polyamorous family at the end seems like a great story for many LGBT people today.

This story is certainly Biblical endorsement of A. Powell Davies and Muriel Davies's view that "different kinds of people make different sorts of marriages", yet are they right to link marriage so strongly to "civilisation"? Probably not. There are good reasons why we do not use the term civilisation in the same way today that the Davies's used it in the early 1960s. This is best encapsulated in the story of when Mahatma Gandhi visited London and a journalist got a quick opportunity to ask him a question, the one that came to the mind of the journalist was "What do you think of civilisation in Britain Mr. Gandhi?" to which Gandhi replied, "I think it would be a very good idea!"

Whether we see something as "civilised" or not can depend just as much on the context we are judging and comparing it from, as what we are trying to analyse. The patriarchal and xenophobic violence that Ruth and Naomi faced may seem barbaric to us, yet women and queer people face similar problems in many parts of our global society today – even in places closer to home than we might imagine.

It is in this sense that an ancient text such as the Book of Ruth can provide us with resources to criticise the oppressive structures in our own society. The

Biblical canon contains many other stories that can be read through a queer lens, a feminist lens, and many other lenses of liberation.

It is our duty as Unitarians to make sure these Biblically queer readings are available to people today. Amen.”

14th November – Louise Reeve and “Remembrance Sunday: Animals in War”

Louise Reeve led our Remembrance Sunday Service. The full text of her service is enclosed with this letter. We asked everyone to consider making a donation to the War Paws charity, as follows:

War Paws was created to: “provide a voice and make the difference for the forgotten animals of war. We feel that the only way to make the difference that is needed is not to just try and remove the animals from war zones and areas of civil conflict, but instead, we aim to provide education for the local populations, provide information and encouragement on better animal welfare and animal husbandry and to promote happy and healthy ownership of animals.”

You can find out more about them here: <https://warpaws.org/our-mission/>

You can make a donation here: <https://warpaws.org/donate/>

or by cheque made payable to War Paws Limited, at: War Paws, PO Box 7344, Wednesbury, West Midlands, WS10 1DX.

21st November – Stephen Jackson and “Our Christian Heritage”

Stephen Jackson led this sequel to his October service on our Christian heritage, a more personal service in which members of the congregation discussed their own experiences of Christianity, and how it has shaped their spiritual lives.

28th November – Margaret Robinson and “Advent”

On the first Sunday in Advent, Margaret Robinson from the Stockton congregation led an uplifting service on “Advent”, which got us all in a festive mood.