

Sermon – “The Gift of Commitment”

Scripture: Ruth 1:1-18

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The Scripture reading for today is Ruth 1:1-18. The story of Ruth is a story of commitment and determination; the commitment between a daughter and mother-in-law and their determination to survive following the tragic deaths of their husbands. In the patriarchal society in which they lived, a woman who was not attached to a male was at the mercy of the economic and social forces that could easily engulf her. For this reason, the law of the levirate marriage specified that the nearest male relative of the deceased marry the widow and provide her a future.

Naomi cannot offer her daughters-in-law a husband to give them a future and so encourages them to return to their mother's home. Ruth's promise to Naomi is a beautiful pledge of loyalty and an oath of solidarity. Ruth chooses separation from her homeland and family and risks her life and her future to stand with Naomi, who has no future and who otherwise would be alone. Listen now for the word of God.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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.

¹⁰ They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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, ¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? 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.”

¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ 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!”

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

The title of the sermon: The Gift of Commitment

The text: *Where you go, I will go; your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. Ruth 1:16b-17a*

Let us pray: Holy God, we thank you for the commitments that enrich our lives and for the community made possible because of the gift of commitment. As we reflect on the story of Ruth and Naomi, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Today our biblical story begins in Bethlehem, which means “the house of bread.” Bethlehem is the birthplace of Jesus, whom we have come to know as “the bread of life” and who gave his life to be broken that our lives might be made whole.

Around 1200 years before the birth of Jesus during the time of the Judges, Naomi, her husband and two sons leave Bethlehem because of a famine, a lack of bread in the place named “the house of bread.” The ancient Hebrew author uses irony throughout this story of commitment.

Following the tragic death of Naomi’s husband and two sons, she and her daughter-in-law Ruth return to Bethlehem, “the house of bread” because they had heard the famine was over. The Story of Ruth begins with a famine and ends in the middle of the barley harvest.

As the story unfolds, we see another ancient law working to protect the poor and hungry in the community. Extra grain at the time of harvest was to be left behind for the foreigner, the orphan and the widow. Ruth, a foreigner and a widow gleans the wheat from the fields of a man named Boaz. Even the crumbs in Bethlehem are life giving for Ruth and Naomi who are at the mercy of those obedient to the ancient law and willing to share what they have.

As it happens Boaz is a distant kinsman on Naomi’s late husband’s side making the law of the levirate marriage possible. Boaz respects Ruth’s kindness to Naomi and her work ethic. As the story unfolds, Boaz honors the marriage law and makes a commitment to Ruth taking her as his wife. Ruth gives birth to a son, Obed, who became the father of Jesse who became the father of King David, in the lineage of Jesus.

Naomi who left Bethlehem whole and returned to Bethlehem broken is whole again through the gift of commitment and a relationship with her deceased son’s widow—a Moabite woman whose name, Ruth, means friendship. Some believe the story of Ruth arose among women storytellers who knew and understood the hardships of Naomi and who believed that her story was worth telling. Some believe the story arose during the post-exilic period (around 500 B.C.E.) to undermine the authority of the priests who were trying to “purify” Israel by ostracizing foreign women. Certainly, the good news of Ruth’s story joins the Story of Jonah and Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan in affirming that foreigners and strangers are God’s own and sometimes reflect God’s loving kindness more graciously than we do.

Whatever the reason for preserving this story of commitment and courage, it is a masterpiece of deep emotional satisfaction and artistic beauty. Who among us cannot identify with Naomi’s sorrow and disappointment...when things turn out differently from what we had planned or anticipated!!

I have a vivid memory of sitting in Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago the summer of 1980, a year before I graduated from seminary. I was struggling with the commitment I had made to the ministry. There were too many losses, disappointments, and sacrifices along the way. For many reasons the journey I began whole had broken me. My spirit was starving and I was hungry for inspiration and spiritual nourishment. Dr. Elam Davies preached a sermon that Sunday on Ruth entitled, “Does a commitment story always have a happy ending?” His words touched me and fed me! The story of Ruth gave me the courage to keep my commitment and to “keep on walking” down the path I chose, on a journey which has led me to Westminster to be your Pastor and Head of Staff.

I went into the ministry looking for answers to questions and for certainty to sustain me in the uncertainty of life. I discovered that only when I was willing to question the answers of the church and tolerate the uncertainty we are all asked to endure would I begin to partake of the “Bread of Life.” I went into the ministry looking for happiness. I discovered that only when I was willing to enter with people into their struggle and disappointment could I also share with them in their joy, and experience my own.

Ruth was willing to enter into Naomi’s emptiness. Together they found their way back to the house of bread. They found nourishment but not without humiliation and they found a home with Boaz but not without sacrifice and risk.

We learn from this story that the gift of commitment is not always a “happy ending.” The gift of commitment is the courage to give of ourselves and to invest in each other with no guarantees. The gift of commitment is the strength to “keep on walking” even when we’re tired and irritated and “prone to wander.” The gift of commitment sometimes means walking away from a relationship that does not honor or respect who we are. The gift of commitment always challenges us to be all we can be to those we love. The gift of commitment gives our life meaning and makes this faith community possible.

Today we gather to honor the saints of Westminster who have died this past year, to give thanks for the commitments within their lives, and to affirm the God who welcomes us home at the end of our journey. Our Memorial Garden witnesses to this church’s commitment to those who have gone before us and today we dedicate the new south wall in the continuation of our garden which was established in 2001.

Today we will highlight another story of commitment in our 2018 Bay Weekend. In preparation for the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, Westminster welcomes home Presidential Historian Dr. Tom Schwartz, who will nourish our spirits with the story of Herbert Hoover’s humanitarianism during the Great War. Representing the United States of America, Mr. Hoover provided bread and sustenance, feeding close to 10 million French and Belgian citizens who were hungry, broken, and behind enemy lines.

Today, we gather as a faith community to give thanks for the gift of commitment and for those who keep their commitments, the kind of commitment we find in the Story of Ruth. We give thanks for the One who was born through Ruth’s lineage in the city of Bethlehem—the house of bread, the One who calls us to feed the hungry, the One who welcomes us home at the end of our journey, and the One who is to us the Bread of Life. Amen