

“Love & Loyalty”

Ruth 1:14-18, 4:13-15

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Commitment Sunday

There was a time when the people of God had a relationship with God that you could only refer to as troubled. This is the time of the judges. If you read the Biblical book of Judges, you will think to yourself: Wow, that’s really ... gross.

The Book of Judges is the most disgusting book of the Bible. In it, people were constantly losing God’s grace before God’s graceful loyalty gives it back to them.

The book of Ruth follows that pattern, but it is different. Nothing gross about it. In fact, some of it has a nearly bucolic quality. It is a book where there are only two types of people: good and better.

It begins in a time of famine. A family that lives near Bethlehem: Bethlehem means: house of bread. But in this famine, the breadbox has been empty for a long time. In desperation, the family leaves their land behind, and goes to the land of Moab.

Moab is that place where good people automatically say: “Why would you ever go to a place like that?” You only go to a place like that when you are desperate. Elim’elech and his wife Naomi. Naomi means: Sweetness.

They have two sons: Mahlon and Chilion: Mahlon means: Sickness. Chilion means: “Destruction.” It is a bit of a cautionary tale: Parents, please, think about names before you give them to your children.

First the fields of Moab destroy the pater familias: Elim’elech. Then, with no father to guide them, Mahlon and Chilion marry girls from Moab. These girls from the wrong side of the tracks. You think, oh, this is not going to go well.

Orpah and Ruth. Not only do they not bear children, but then Mahlon and Chilion follow their destiny: they die. No judgement on them: it was just coming.

This leaves all three women without anyone to provide for them, protect them.

If Naomi stays here, she has no income. No social security. No Medicare. No Medicaid. As a foreigner, she is not even going to be welcomed at the social welfare office. Imagine living in a country like that!

Naomi is beside herself with why these terrible things have happened to her. She whose name means Sweetness, says: don't call me that anymore: call me Bitterness, because God has abandoned me.

But suddenly, Naomi hears that God has filled the house of Bread again. Bethlehem, the house of bread, is filled up again. She decides to return to her home country, where she can get, at the very least, meager help from her family.

She tells both daughters in law to please, face reality: Go back to your own families of origin. Orpah and Ruth cry, tell her they love her and beg to stay with her. She tells them again, they cry even louder.

After the third time that she tells them, Orpah, having wept a sufficient amount, takes her advice and goes home. The name Orpah, by the way, means: back of the neck. That's the last they ever see of Orpah, the back of her neck.

But Ruth means fertility. And it means friendship. Ruth refuses to face reality the reality: that if she stays with Naomi, the rest of her life is, in all likelihood, going to be nasty, brutal and short.

Ruth clings to Naomi. She gives a speech that is without being poetry amazingly poetic. It is lyrical perfection. In one of the most beautiful speeches of all literature this woman whose name means: fertile friendship says to this woman to whom she does not owe a thing:

"Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you wander and in whatever barn or field you lay your head for the night, I will be right there with you. Your people, no matter how strange, difficult, odd they are (even the weird ones who show up at Thanksgiving) will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will be buried alongside of you. May the Lord strike me anytime with afflictions, if anything but death parts us."

Wow. Who doesn't yearn for a friend like that?

Because of Ruth, Naomi goes from bitterness to a new life of sweetness. Because of Naomi, Ruth find a new relationship, not just a new husband and new child, but a new community, and a new God.

Ruth, this foreigner, from the wrong side of the sociological tracks and the wrong side of the theological tracks, becomes the embodiment of a key value for people of God: loyalty.

You don't hear that word much anymore. We live in a world that thinks more along the lines of utility. Cost-benefit analysis.

If an employer does not benefit you... if an employee does not benefit you enough, cut them loose. If a friend does not benefit you anymore, cut them loose.

The dominant values: is utility. Usefulness. Can I use someone or not?

The problem being this leads to a whole lot of insecurity. To people wondering: am I just being used? Worse yet: Do I have to use someone else in order to succeed or even survive?

The book of Ruth opens up a whole alternate world: the world of loyalty. A world of depth. Where we see the inherent value of a person. Where we see the inherent value of an institution.

There are all sorts of key values that are associated with loyalty. If you have loyalty, you look for depth. You can accept difference. You rid yourself of instability, of fear, of needing to protect yourself. Somebody has your back. Somebody is watching out for your greater good. Just plain: somebody is thinking about you. Cares that you exist. Somebody is praying for you.

H. Richard Niebuhr, in line with Josiah Royce, says: Be loyal not just to a person, but to the cause that is loyal to you. Be loyal to that which is loyal to you. And only God is always loyal.

Of course it is not just loyalty alone. It is the cause that is loyal to you. Loyalty to a shared cause forms us into a people, a society. The only one who is always loyal is God. So being loyal to God, and to the people of God, forms a worldview where love is possible. Where self-centeredness fades, and other centeredness comes into view as a possibility.

Jesus says: "No longer do you call me teacher, but call me friend. I have called you friends: I give my life for you. Now give your lives for one another." Jesus shows the ultimate loyalty of God to us. He shows the ultimate form of love. He sets us free to love and be loyal to other human beings. And to form the community of the church, where we share these ultimate values, and are set free to love in powerful ways.

Your pledge is one practical way that you embody this love. It empowers this community of God to love in synergistic ways that multiply the power of our love and loyalty. As with Ruth, we discover that our loyalty in love can have world changing power. As we have been exploring in this autumn, "With God all things are possible." We know this even more profoundly from the insights of Ruth: God is never going to give up on you.