

Sermon – “Persisting in Loyalty”

Scripture: Ruth 1:1-18, Mark 12:28-34

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Our first scripture reading for today is Ruth 1:1-18. The story of Ruth is a story of loyalty and resilience as a daughter and mother-in-law survive following the tragic deaths of their husbands. In the ancient patriarchal society, 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 in Moab. 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 Mahlon 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. Amen.

We conclude our sermon series on persisting with the story of Ruth and Naomi. Our gospel reading for today is Mark 12:28-34. Listen to the interaction and respect between Jesus' and one of the scribes. This is the Holy word of God.

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, the scribe asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² Then the scribe said to Jesus, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'God is one, and besides God there is no other'; ³³ and 'to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." ³⁴ When Jesus saw that the scribe answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask Jesus any question. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Persisting in Loyalty

The text: *But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Ruth 1:16*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, we thank you for the gift of loyalty and for all the ways our lives are enriched when we keep the commitments that bind us one to another. 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.

If the story of Job teaches us the importance of persisting in integrity, lament, reverence, and humility, then the story of Ruth's persistence in loyalty strengthens the commitments within each of our lives. The tenderness between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth highlights the importance of upholding the promises we make to those whom God has brought into our lives and has called us to serve, even in times of difficulty. Persisting in loyalty is an emerging allegiance, an act of fidelity, a duty and a responsibility, which holds one another in respect, honor, and affection.

There are parallels between persisting in loyalty and the greatest commandment to love, which Jesus and the Scribe discussed together in our gospel reading. Our ability to be loyal to one another is strengthened by our ability to be loyal to ourselves in the same way that we cannot love one another if we do not love ourselves. Likewise, loyalty to one another and to ourselves is not possible without loyalty to the One who creates, redeems, and sustains us. Each builds upon the other with our faith as the foundation.

Preaching on Ruth and Naomi the Sunday following the death of my own mother, Betty Denham, is both poignant and meaningful. Many of you know that my mom has lived with Peter and me since March of 2018. It has been a privilege and a joy to welcome her into our home even as she welcomed me into the house where she and my father raised me.

Joan Chittister, a leading voice in contemporary spirituality, believes the fourth commandment, Honor your father and your mother, *asks us to look again at the way we care for those who,*

having gone before us, show us the way. It reminds us, at the same time, of our own debt to generations to come.

One of the silver linings in the COVID cloud in our home was the time Paul got to spend with his grandmother as he prepared to take the bar. The bond between Betty and her son-in-law and personal physician was a breath of fresh air. The only thing Betty did not fully appreciate about Peter was his incredibly delicious homemade artisan bread. She loved the smell but chose not to partake in an act of discipline she adopted as a young woman.

Ironically, the story of Ruth begins in Bethlehem, literally “the house of bread,” which 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. Approximately 1200 years before Christ’s birth, Naomi, her husband and two sons leave Bethlehem because of a famine, a lack of bread. The ancient Hebrew author uses irony throughout this story of loyalty and 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” following word that the famine ended. 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 established to protect the poor in the community in an act of loyalty. Extra grain at the time of harvest was to be left behind for the foreigner, the orphan, and the widow. Ruth gleanes 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 who persist in loyalty to the ancient law and who are willing to share what they have.

It so happens that Boaz is a distant kinsman of Naomi’s late husband. Boaz is attracted to Ruth and respects her for her loyalty to Naomi. A marriage between Boaz and Ruth is arranged. Their son Obed became the father of Jesse who became the father of King David, in the lineage of Jesus. Naomi who left Bethlehem whole and returned broken is whole again because of the respect and loyalty she has received from her deceased son’s widow—a Moabite woman whose name, Ruth, means friendship.

Some believe the story of Ruth arose among women storytellers who believed her story was worth telling. Some believe the story arose during the post-exilic period (around 500 B.C.E.) to undermine the priests who were trying to “purify” Israel by banishing foreign women. Whatever the reason for preserving this story of loyalty and courage, it is a masterpiece of deep emotional satisfaction and artistic beauty.

We learn from this story that loyalty is the courage to give of ourselves and to invest in each other with no guarantees. Loyalty challenges us to be all we can be to those we love. Loyalty gives our life meaning, affirms our humanity, and makes community possible.

Today, as we gather to celebrate Reformation Day, we give thanks to those who came before us, persisting in loyalty, to preserve the integrity of the faith we received from the Bread of life. 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 lives, and the One who is to us the Bread of Life. Amen