

October 18, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Loss of Loyalty - a Lament

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Ruth 1:1-18

“And they all lived happily ever after.” The story of Ruth has been a favorite of Bible readers throughout the centuries. In the midst of scriptures filled with war and the threat of war, with trickery and treachery, with attempts at genocide and brutal reprisals, with disobedience and unfaithfulness, the Book of Ruth is viewed as an island of tranquility. In this story people act well toward one another and the community celebrates a happy ending for all.

The Book of Ruth is a small story of two widows and a farmer in their out-of-the-way village. Like some of us, the outsider Ruth was not born into the faith and felt no natural part of it. But, she came to find herself gathered into the story and given a quiet and obscure part that proved critical to how everything turned out.

Many will recall Ruth’s extravagant statement of loyalty to her mother-in-law:

*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. (Ruth1:16-17)*

Wow! Can you imagine anyone talking like that to their mother-in-law today? Such loyalty is spiritual, not biological, and it seems in short supply in the 21st Century.

It used to be you could do business on a handshake. That’s not true anymore, business people tell

me. It used to be that a bank would make a commitment to an employee for a lifetime. That's not true anymore either. It used to be that employees were loyal to the company that gave them their first job. Not anymore. How many people do you know who have changed jobs for an extra \$3,000 a year? I know quite a few. Today's college graduates are told to expect that they will have a dozen or more employers in their lifetime.

Contrast that with my grandfather. My grandfather went to work for the Pinkerton Detective Agency during the depression. In the 40s, 50s, and 60s, he was offered all kinds of other positions with more pay and greater chance for advancement. He wouldn't think of it. "The Pinkertons helped me when I needed it, now I can help them," he'd say.

Do you remember when high school seniors thought of college as a four-year commitment? Now they say, "I'm going to Miami in the fall, but I'm not really sure. Well, if I don't like it, I can always transfer."

Do you remember when a pro sports star signed a big ticket, multi-year contract and it meant he would play for the same team, for the agreed upon salary, for the agreed upon number of years? Now if a star has a good year he wants to renegotiate for still higher pay or be traded. Can you imagine Rocky Bleier or Lynn Swann or Terry Bradshaw ever doing that?

The whole idea of loyalty and commitment to people, institutions, beliefs, ideas, places, and callings now seems antiquated. We've even developed a new vocabulary for commitments. Just listen how kids talk about it—phrases like, "Blow it off!" "No deal!" "Commitment overload." "Face Book official"—that's when you know your dating—when it's "Face Book official."

The Bible has its own language about loyalty and commitment too. The word chosen there is "covenant." In the Bible a covenant is a pledge or agreement of loyalty and commitment between two parties made in front of witnesses. Most often it is initiated by God. Some see as many as nine separate covenants in the Bible. Others, preferring to emphasize only the division of old and new covenants, see the other covenants as variations on the same theme. The old covenant of human obligation gave Israel a conscience, while the new covenant of divine commitment gave Israel an undying hope.

The church—this church and all churches—the church is built on the concept of covenant. We call ourselves a covenant people and of course we are.

Covenant—

Standing in front of the Baptismal Font we ask, "Do you intend your child to be Christ's disciple, to obey his word, and show his love?"

Covenant—

Kneeling here as confirmands, we ask: "Do you trust in Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior?"

Covenant—

Standing in front of the chancel steps, we ask new members: "Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?"

Covenant—

Shaking with anxiety the groom takes the bride's hand and says, "...and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be thy loving and faithful husband—in plenty and in want—in joy and in sorrow—in sickness and in health—till death us do part."

Covenant—

Before you kneel and we place our hands on your head, we ask you, "Will you be a faithful deacon, teaching charity, urging concern, and directing the people's help to the friendless and those in need?"

Covenant—

Right here, at this table, don't we say, "In the same way, he took the cup after supper, and said: 'This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this, remembering me.'"

In *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo Baggins (played by Elijah Wood), a hobbit, is given the unenviable task of destroying a ring in The Cracks of Doom in a dark and evil land called Mordor. His task is fraught with mortal danger.

Gandalf the wizard (played by Ian McKellen) understands such a perilous journey could cause anyone to become discouraged. Gandalf encourages Frodo's best friend, Samwise Gamgee (played by Sean Astin), to accompany Frodo on the trip. In fact, Gandalf makes Samwise promise he will never leave Frodo. Several other brave individuals accompany Frodo as well. These nine travelers become the "Fellowship of the Ring."

Well into the journey, the lives of those in the Fellowship have been endangered on multiple occasions. Concerned for the safety of his friends, Frodo makes a private and noble decision to slip away from his friends and make the remainder of the journey on his own. Frodo steps into a boat and quietly pushes away from the shore.

Suddenly the branches on the sloping hill above the shore begin to snap and give way to a tiny hobbit warrior. Samwise Gamgee crashes through the branches and onto the shore, shouting, "Frodo! Mr. Frodo!"

Frodo yells back, "Go back, Sam! I'm going to Mordor alone!"

Sam is not deterred. He continues toward Frodo, splashing into the river up to his waist. "Of course you are, and I'm coming with you!"

"You can't swim!" Frodo shouts. "Sam! Sam!"

Sam tries desperately to swim out to the boat. Frodo watches as Sam begins to sink beneath the murky surface of the river.

Fredo reaches down and grabs Sam's wrist, pulling him up and into the boat. Frodo looks at Sam as if to say, *Why? Why would you risk your life attempting to swim out to me?*

A soaking-wet Sam sees the question in Frodo's eyes and says, "I made a promise, Mr. Frodo. A promise. 'Don't you leave him, Samwise Gamgee.' And I don't mean to. I don't mean to."

Fredo embraces Sam. "Come on," he smiles.

Wasn't it Teddy Roosevelt who said, "It's better to be loyal than famous"?

As you know in just two weeks we will fill out pledge cards for our generous support of Westminster. We call it "Stewardship Sunday," but some churches use a different name they call it "Loyalty Sunday." "Loyalty Sunday"—a chance to express your loyalty to God and this church.

I am reminded of that great quote by Carl Menninger which is on the cover of today's bulletin. "Loyalty means not that I am you, or that I agree with everything you say or that I believe you are always right. Loyalty means I share a common ideal with you and that regardless of minor differences we fight for it, shoulder to shoulder, confident in one another's good faith, trust, constancy and affection."

But, if it's true that we live in a culture that no longer values a commitment, a culture that dismisses loyalty, a culture that doesn't understand covenant anymore; and if it's also true that the church is based on covenant loyalty—God's gracious promise to love us and our faithful response; if both of those things are true, where are we headed as a church?

A couple of weeks ago in a church meeting one of our elders said, "This issue goes way beyond money, even in a sense beyond religion. In a profound way, our happiness as human beings depends on our ability to make commitments beyond ourselves and to maintain loyalty."

Do you believe that?