

A Pledge of Loyalty
Ruth 1:1-18
November 5, 2006

The beautiful story of Ruth begins with tragedy. Before Ruth enters into the picture, a Hebrew family journeys from Bethlehem to Moab because there is a famine. The name “Bethlehem” means “house of bread,” but there is no longer bread to feed the hungry in this house. The depth of desperation is indicated by the fact that this Hebrew family moves to Moab. Moab is a country on the east side of the Dead Sea. There is deep-rooted enmity between the Hebrews and Moabites. Anxious to keep his family alive, Elimelech crosses the border into the despised land of Moab.

Although they find food in Moab, Elimelech’s family also encounters great loss there. The patriarch himself dies. His two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. The son’s names, Mahlon and Chilion, sound like the Hebrew words for “diseased” and “perishing.” Ten years into their sojourn the two sons die. The three women are left as widows. The women are in a desperate plight, for in their culture marriage is considered the only respectable way for a woman to achieve social and economic security.

When a young woman is left a widow, it was customary for the deceased man’s brother to marry the widow and father a child to carry on the brother’s name. In this case, there are no more brothers to fulfill that obligation. Naomi knows she has to make a bold move in order to recover security for herself and her family. She decides to leave the foreign land and return to her homeland, to her own kin. She knows that she cannot expect her daughters-in-law to follow her. She relieves them of their responsibility for her, and encourages them to return to their own families and begin their lives over. Initially both Orpah and Ruth protest, but eventually Orpah is obedient and bids farewell, returning to her family.

As Ruth stands at the crossroads with Naomi and Orpah, there is a cacophony of voices sounding in her ears. It is a confusing moment in which there is little time to make a crucial decision. To which voice would she listen?

One voice is that of security, calling her back home to her parents, who will care for her until she finds someone else to marry. This is the comforting voice, calling her home to the land where she knows the customs, speaks the language, and has legal rights as a citizen. Here she is an insider; in Judah she will be an outsider, subject to the pain and prejudice that comes with being a foreigner. As an alien widow, no one will feel an

obligation to care for her. She will be a nobody, fending for herself. The voice calling her back to safety, familiarity, and tradition sounds strong.

There is also another voice that speaks to Ruth. She hears the pangs of loneliness and fear emanating from Naomi's weary body. She hears the frail beat of Naomi's heart, broken by grief for her husband and sons. She hears the thunder of Naomi's rage against God for leaving her alone and destitute. This voice scarred with pain arouses Ruth's compassion. She resonates with Naomi's grief and fear, for she too has lost her husband and dreams. Ruth's heart responds with love as she considers Naomi's brokenness. The summons to love overpowers the voice of comfort and security that lures her back home. Ruth, whose name means "refreshment," offers hope to Naomi, who has claimed a new name, Mara, meaning "bitter." Ruth takes the risk and chooses the more excellent way, the way of love and loyalty.

She offers Naomi her pledge of loyalty, "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. 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).

Ruth's pledge to Naomi is a declaration of solidarity. Her act is an expression of the Hebrew concept of *hesed*, showing love and loyalty over and beyond what is considered normal or expected. In ancient times, a covenant conveyed the idea of a treaty in which there were two parties that were bound by it. If one of these parties failed to fulfill its obligations, the other party would be excused from fulfilling the contract. The biblical concept of divine *hesed* goes beyond the norm and is contrary to legal expectations.¹ When God enters into covenant with God's people, they can trust in the unfailing love of God. We humans are fickle and we often fail to keep our commitments, but God's loyalty to us never fails.

In binding herself to Naomi and to Naomi's God, Ruth's life takes on dimensions she has not imagined. Faithfully fulfilling her commitment, she follows Naomi to her homeland, where she gleanes food from the fields of Boaz to provide for Naomi and herself. Boaz befriends and marries her. Ruth has a child named Obed, the grandson of Naomi, the grandfather of King David, the ancestor of Jesus of Nazareth. Ruth's pledge of faithfulness and loyalty reaps rewards for generations and centuries, even to this day.

There is a little Sufi story about a stream of water working itself across the country, experiencing little difficulty. It ran around the rocks and through the mountains. Then it arrived at the desert. Just as it had crossed

every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared. After many attempts, it became very discouraged.

Then a voice came. "If you stay the way you are you cannot cross the sands; you cannot become more than a quagmire. To go further, you will have to lose yourself."

The stream protested, "But if I lose myself, I will never know what I'm supposed to be."

"On the contrary," said the voice. "If you lose yourself you will become more than you ever dreamed you could be."

So the stream surrendered to the dying sun. The clouds into which it was formed were carried by the raging wind for many miles. Once it crossed the desert, the stream poured down from the skies, fresh and clean and full of the energy that comes from storms.

If you lose yourself, you will become more than you ever dreamed you could be. Ruth was willing to lose herself through steadfast love. Through that love, she became more than she ever thought she would be. She loved again, made a home for her mother-in-law, and gave birth to Obed, who was of the lineage and line of Jesus.

Ruth's pledge of loyalty is not only to Naomi but also to Naomi's God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Today we are consecrating our pledges to the ministry of Jesus Christ through this congregation in the new year. Several persons are becoming members of this congregation. Our ultimate commitment is to the God revealed to us by Jesus. As members of the Body of Christ, we bind ourselves to Jesus Christ. We are saying, "Your God will be my God." We make a promise of love and loyalty. We lose ourselves in love for God, that we might become more than we ever dreamed we could be. The way of Jesus is not necessarily the easy way; it is not a worldly way. It can be a risky, lonely venture. That is exactly why we cannot do it alone. We need to bond not only with God, but also with fellow Christians who offer us support and accountability.

A prayer of St. Patrick serves as a declaration of loyalty, just as Ruth made to Naomi:

I bind to myself today
Your power, O God, to hold and lead,
Your eye to watch, your might to stay,
Your ear to listen to my need,
Your wisdom, O my God, to teach,
Your hand to guide, your shield to protect,
Your living Word to guide my speech,

Your heavenly host to be my guard.

Let us bind ourselves anew to be the people of our loving God and faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. Let us bind ourselves anew to one another in the Living Body of Christ today.

¹ Elaine Padilla, “The Love that Never Fails – *Hesed* and Covenant in Hosea,” *The Living Pulpit*, July-September 2005, p. 16.

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