

"Commitment!"

A sermon from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Ruth 1:14-18

Matt Matthews
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This passage from Ruth is one of the best known in the Old Testament; it's the Gettysburg Address of the Bible. We can finish Ruth's impassioned sentences:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!" Ruth says to her mother-in-law Naomi.

“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!”

I asked you in my Friday emailer what is your one-word summary of this passage. You used words like *loyalty*, *love*, *support*, *friendship*, *diversity*, *faithfulness*. The story of Ruth defies a one-word summary, but these words are good ones. The word I'd add today is commitment. In this passage we see that Ruth is committed to Naomi. She will not let Naomi travel alone from the wilderness of Moab to her ancestral home in Bethlehem. Ruth will be a companion, a friend, an advocate for her mother-in-law. And, as one reads the short story of Ruth, one sees that Naomi will be loyal and committed to her daughter-in-law; a distant relative named Boaz will be committed to helping these two widows. "Commitment" is one of the many golden threads that weave this story together.

* * *

Scott Reeder, writing in the News Gazette on Wednesday wrote a column about commitment entitled "Take people as they come, not as they appear." He tells the story about how his daughter wanted to adopt a dog. Mr. Reeder and his wife told their daughter that, no, the family did not need a dog. The daughter won the argument. They got the dog.

Mr. Reeder thought the mutt was a mix between a Labrador retriever and a German shepherd, with a little coonhound mixed in. Another relative thought the dog was part Rhodesian ridgeback. His wife thought there was some pit bull in Johnny's family history. Their daughter, Caitlin, did not care what Johnny was. She just loved him.

Mr. Reeder is a veteran statehouse reporter in Springfield. He's covered trials. He drew a parallel between the dinner table conversations about Johnny's pedigree and his work as a journalist. He writes this:

“Typically, reporters covering a trial will describe a jury by its racial and ethnic composition.

“Since reporters cannot talk to jurors during a trial, it becomes a guessing game. Is she Italian or Hispanic? Is he black or bi-racial? Is Juror No. 10 an Indian American? Or maybe he’s Middle Eastern?”

Mr. Reeder writes that we live in a nation where identity is increasingly ambiguous. It’s more and more difficult to define us by where we come from and who our people are. And he suggests that we shouldn’t worry about that so much. We should accept and respect all people, no matter their pedigree.

His daughter’s love of and commitment to that dog reminded him of the regard we ought to have towards everyone, no matter the differences.

Mr. Reeder’s wife is a veterinarian, and they did a DNA test on Johnny-the-dog. As it turns out, he is 17-different breeds. He’s only 1-percent Labrador. There is no German shepherd in his blood, nor is Johnny a Rhodesian ridgeback or coonhound.

Caitlin always knew the deeper truth. Johnny is Johnny no matter where his comes from, and, “I love him.”

* * *

Naomi is a Jew and Ruth is a foreigner; but Ruth loves Naomi. Ruth will stand by Naomi’s side. Ruth could stay home with her own blood relatives; but Ruth will travel with Naomi. The journey through the wilderness may be dangerous; but Ruth will go anyway. If they make it to Naomi’s hometown of Bethlehem, Ruth may not be accepted because she’s a foreigner; but Ruth is willing to risk that because of her love of and commitment to Naomi. Despite the differences between these two women—differences of age, nationality, religion, culture—despite the danger of this journey, despite the possibility that Ruth may be rejected by Naomi’s people, Ruth remains as committed to her mother-in-law as little Caitlin was to Johnny. Love does that.

* * *

Every year at this time, your church talks about stewardship. We talk about our financial commitment to God’s ministry through this congregation. We turn in a pledge card as a small way of telling God (and each other) that we are committed to the work of the church. This season celebrating *our* commitment to God and God’s church here reminds us of God’s unwavering commitment to us. We love God because, and only because, God first loved us. And that love is from everlasting to everlasting.

We pause to thank God that even if and when our commitment to God falters or fails, God’s commitment to us will not. God keeps God’s promises.

* * *

We get the impression that Ruth will keep her promises to Naomi.

Ruth seems to be saying, “I don’t care if this journey is dangerous. I don’t care if my decision to stay with you doesn’t make sense. I am committed to you, Naomi. I will be your companion, your relative, your friend. You can count on it.

In a day when people seem to be committed to lesser and fewer things and ideals, it’s inspiring to bear witness to Ruth’s promise to Naomi. God will use this committed friendship to bless the whole wide world. Naomi and Ruth will make it to Bethlehem in one piece. Naomi will help her

daughter-in-law meet Boaz. Boaz will make promises. He and this brave foreigner named Ruth will have a child named Obed. Obed will have a child named Jesse. Jesse will have a child named David. And from this root springs the family tree of Jesus himself.

In our lives and ministry in and beyond this historic church, may we be as bold, as loving, as brave, and as committed as Ruth, who stood by her friend no matter what.

“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.

To God be the glory now and forever.

AMEN.

Ruth 1:14-18 ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶But 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. ¹⁷Where 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!" ¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.