

Great Women of the Bible – Ruth
Ruth 1: 1-19
June 24, 2007

How times have changed in America in the lives of people just one generation ago. When I think of my parents' generation and how it was for them and how it is now I am amazed. Men of my dad's generation generally worked for one company and certainly in one profession all of their lives. My grandfather worked for one company in one line of work for his entire life. My dad worked in many positions for the same company and we moved nine times while I was still living at home. That was not that unusual. You stayed with one company for many years working toward a fixed pension. In my generation the average stay with one company is seven years. Many people have two or three very different careers. I have worked for five employers over twenty-seven years in two different careers. I simply pick up my retirement program and move it from one account to another.

For American women the changes have been even more dramatic. Just forty or fifty years ago a minority of women worked outside the home. If a woman did work, her options were quite limited – from education to nursing to just a few other fields. Now opportunities flourish from the pulpit to the boardroom. Women are now the majority in the workplace. Yes, the vocational landscape has changed dramatically just in one or two generations.

Because of downsizing and portable retirement programs and the opportunity to have multiple careers and many other factors the ethic about loyalty has changed. My father modeled for me over thirty years a strong ethic around loyalty – an attitude that he was in it for the long haul with his company and that there was a kind of paternalism

between the employee and the employer. He was willing to make many sacrifices in the the assignment where he served and in the places that his family would live and in the frequency of the moves we would make. That is just the way things worked. I never remember a single discussion about leaving the company that he worked for until he took early retirement. He was absolutely loyal to his company and to his family. But you know, I am not so sure that his company was very loyal to him. His career went very well for a while and he achieved a high level of responsibility. But one year the division he helped run took a downturn and he took the hit for that performance. He never received a promotion again after that. I still remember that and it had an enormous influence on the suspicion with which I viewed corporate America.

I am not alone in a culture of great suspicion and lagging loyalty. No we live in a time where we ask, “what benefit will I get from my company’s plans.” We talk about company moves and even career changes with the same fluidity as our parents evaluated transfers or new assignments with the same lifelong firms. That same fluidity has affected our relationships as well. Our culture experiences a 50% divorce rate and break-ups among our people in the GLBT community is very high as well. As portable 401K programs have come of age so has no-fault divorce and divorce recovery programs are filled to capacity at churches and in social programs. There is much empowerment for the individual and certainly the marketplace has given us many benefits of the many options for our life’s work. At the same time the disappearance of the ethic of loyalty gives me pause. Perhaps we relegate loyalty to the lovable attributes of the household pet. As a society I am not sure that loyalty is looked at much anymore as a virtue at all, but more as a blind spot of a naive person.

This morning we introduce the story of Ruth, another of our great women of the Bible. When I look at this beautiful woman's loyalty – her chief attribute – and the strangeness of her story, I once again feel that dissonance, that suspicion about her character and its relevance to our place and time. Things were so different then. We don't need to get far into this story today to find out just how different things were. I think of our situation. I think of my raising with my father's career. I think of Watergate and Vietnam and all the suspicion I had for authority early in my life. And then I encounter this remarkable woman and her remarkable story. We have just the first eighteen verses of this story today, but I want to review in miniature the entire short story that we have of her life to see where it intersects our own lives here at Bering. I want to examine the two major values of loyalty and how we treat the stranger among us.

Naomi, the mother-in-law of our heroine, is a Hebrew woman who comes to Moab with her husband and two sons during a drought in the land. The two sons marry Ruth and Orpah. Now Naomi first loses her husband and then her two sons. Her entire nuclear family is gone. All that is left are these two daughters-in-law, who are now dependent upon her. Naomi instructs them to go back to their nuclear families so that they can survive. She has no more sons – no way of providing for them and if they return with her they will be foreigners (Moabites) in Judah. Initially both daughters resist her instructions but ultimately Orpah obeys. She leaves to go home to her family. But Ruth is so motivated by loyalty to her mother-in-law that she pleads to stay with those sympathetic words – where you go I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your God will be my God and your land my land; and I give God this solemn oath, that not even the grave will separate us! Now this story was first told and then written down in a period in

Hebrew history when there was no belief in an afterlife. But Ruth goes beyond her marriage vows – till death us do part – she even goes beyond her understanding of what happens to her in death to affirm that not even death will separate her from her mother-in-law. That is loyalty and friendship between two women of the Bible that may have no rival in all of Scripture. This is loyalty that says I will stay with you even if there is no husband or security in this situation for me at all. That is a loyalty that would even make my father blush. So now Ruth becomes a foreigner, as a Moabite, in the foreign land of Israel. Now our text stops here but I want to continue with the story for it interweaves loyalty and reward and a kind of innerworking of God that is beautiful to behold.

After arriving in Israel, in order to provide food for her and Naomi, Ruth becomes a gleaner of the barley fields of the local landowners. Now taking the scraps from the agricultural fields was given in mercy to foreigners and the poor in Hebrew law. They were entitled to take the gleanings of what was left after the harvest and Ruth worked very hard. So Ruth works in the field of the wealthy older landowner. Boaz takes a shine to Ruth and has heard of her great loyalty to her mother-in-law. So he instructs her to have special rights over the other poor in gleaning from his fields. What we the reader also learn is that Boaz has other special obligations to Ruth. He is her trustee – a family member of Naomi’s dead husband – who is obligated to marry Ruth in some circumstances of the law. So the clever Naomi knows this. She dresses Ruth in her finest dress, and puts perfume on her and sends her to the threshing floor. After a fun night of eating and drinking after a hard day’s work, Ruth sneaks into Boaz’s room as he sleeps and lays at his “feet.” Now this word “feet” may be a euphemism for some other anatomy, but we suspect some hanky-panky before the morning. Boaz accepts his duty to

marry Ruth, after checking with one other family member who is closer to marrying Ruth. That other man doesn't want to share his wealth with a new bride so it is settled that Boaz will marry Ruth. Ruth and Boaz have a son named Obed – which means obedience to God. Obed is the father of Jesse who is the father of the great King David. So Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of David. Of course we know that David is also in the line of Jesus Christ. So God works through this family lineage to reward Ruth for her loyalty to Naomi and to the purposes of God. Loyalty is rewarded. Virtue is ultimately honored.

I think of my Dad. He was loyal to an institution that did not ultimately honor him. His loyalty was not rewarded. He could have gone somewhere else and done much better for himself. Is loyalty always honored? Think of a situation in which you have been loyal and have not experienced a reward for being loyal. Or think also how Ruth chose loyalty over obedience. She decided not to be obedient to Naomi, even though Orpah was true to that other value. You know sometimes we get confused the loyalties we pay to institutions versus the loyalty we show to God. I make that mistake all the time. It is particularly confusing to me now since the institution of the United Methodist Church is also the vehicle of God's sovereign action in the world. So how do we know what to be loyal to anymore? What can we trust as we are led in obedience and loyalty to God's greater purposes in the world? That's a tough one, isn't it?

Maybe our friend Ruth can be some help here. Ruth chose Naomi as the object of her loyalty. Naomi and Ruth had developed a relationship over a number of years. I believe that Ruth did not innocently enter into this loyal bond. She knew Naomi well and knew that Naomi was deeply committed to God and had Ruth's best interests at heart.

She did not instruct Ruth to return to her family out of her own self-interest. She did not simply want to get rid of Ruth. Ruth was a young, strong woman. Most like Naomi was not. Things would have been much harder on Naomi if she had been alone. No, Ruth knew that Naomi's heart was pure. She acted out of love for Ruth. So Ruth did exactly the same. It was loyalty returned for loyalty. It was not a blind kind of loyalty. In the end it was undergirded and rewarded by the mysterious unseen God of Israel.

But Ruth went into this covenant with her eyes wide open. And so should you and I. There is still room for loyalty in our world. In fact it is still one of the highest ideals and virtues to which we can aspire. Let us find in Ruth, the stranger, the discernment and the courage to enter into relationships of fidelity and selflessness and loyalty – keeping in mind that we have a loving Creator who will not let that loyalty go unnoticed.