

“A Covenant-Making People”
October 27, 2019
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Ruth 1:1-18

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. 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. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. 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, both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

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. 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. 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. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.” 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? 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, 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.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” 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. 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!” When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

Covenant – making a promise, and sticking to it – is so important to our denomination. You might even say it's the bedrock of what it means to be UCC.

And it just so happens that today's lesson is all about covenant, a covenant made between Ruth and Naomi.

As our story opens this morning, we learn right away that Ruth and Naomi lived during the time the judges ruled Israel, which would be after the Hebrew people had settled into Canaan after their 40-year stint in the desert, but before they started getting all their kings. The first person we meet in this story is Elimelech; he is a Hebrew, married to Naomi, and they have two sons together, Mahlon and Chilion. This Hebrew family of four has been living in the foreign land of Moab because of a famine in their home country of Judah.

As if it's not hard enough to be living as strangers in a strange land, Elimelech, Naomi's husband, suddenly dies, leaving Naomi alone with her two sons. Eventually, the sons marry two Moabite women, two non-Hebrew women, Orpah and Ruth. And *then*, as if it's not hard enough to be living as strangers in a strange land, *and* to have your husband die, Naomi's two *sons* die, leaving the three women – one Jewish mother and two Moabite daughters-in-law – to fend for themselves, alone.

The years pass; and one day, Naomi hears through the grapevine that the famine in her home country of Judah has ended. She can finally go home! Hooray! So she packs her bags and sets off.

The strange thing is, her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, want to go with her. Though Naomi loves her daughters-in-law very much, it really doesn't make sense for them to go with her. For one thing, they already have a life in Moab; but more to the point, they are not Hebrews – they don't worship the Hebrew God or share in the Hebrew customs – and they would probably feel terribly out of place in Judah, probably much like Naomi herself has felt over these last years. So Naomi tells them, "Go on, girls. Go on back to your real mother's house. I love you, I bless you, but now it's time for us to go our separate ways."

Well, these girls have known Naomi a long time – she really is like a second mother to them – so they resist at first. "No, no, we love you. We want to go with you," they persist. Naomi is touched by their loyalty, but presses them, "No, girls, I mean it. You are still young and strong, with your whole lives ahead of you. Don't let me get in the way of that. Go on, and I mean it." The girls are crying, but Orpah dutifully kisses her mother-in-law, and turns towards home.

But Ruth... Ruth just stands there. Stubborn, deviant, devoted Ruth clings to Naomi, refusing to leave her. Naomi pleads with her: "Come on, honey. Let go of me. I don't want to be responsible for your happiness, or lack thereof, anymore. See how Orpah has already left? Go on now, go on with your sister-in-law and leave me in peace."

Well. Ruth looks straight into her mother-in-law's eyes, and declares, "Stop telling me to leave you. Stop telling me to go back home. 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!"

Naomi lets out a huge sigh. She can't fight it anymore; Ruth has convinced her. The two women walk on. Together.

*Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge,
Your people will be my people, your God, my God.
Where you go, I will go. Where you die, I will die
And with you, I will be buried. You and I, yes, you and I.*

*Don't tell me to turn from you. Don't tell me to go.
I'm staying right beside you. My love, you'll surely know.*

*You want to push me from you. You want to run away.
But know I'll never leave you. I promise I will stay.*

Where you go, I will go. In other words: *I am making a covenant with you.* Covenant. That's what this story is all about. Way back in the day, Ruth makes a covenant with Naomi. She promises her loyalty – her steadfast love – to Naomi, no matter what. Covenant. And the cool thing, the thing that makes this story so beautiful in my opinion, is that Ruth is doing something that *God* is always longing to do with us with us: make covenant. Have relationship. In the covenant that Ruth makes with Naomi, Ruth is imitating the God who makes covenant with her... who makes covenant with *us*. (Did you notice that my song could be sung from the point of view of Ruth... OR God?).

Our God is a covenant-making God and our church is a covenant-making church. As I shared with you at the beginning of this sermon, this is something that I really love about our denomination. UCC churches really *get* covenant. As I see it, the polity of the UCC is all *about* covenant: member to member-covenant, pastor-to-church covenant, church to church-covenant, church to association, to conference, to the national setting-covenant. Here in the UCC, we get it! It's all about covenant!

But in this country, it seems to me that churches are – more often than not – defined by being like-minded, by people agreeing to, well, *agree* with each other all the time. You've got your conservative/traditional churches, you've got your liberal/progressive churches, you've got your churches in-between... you've got all these churches, where in order to belong, you have to believe all the same things, whatever those things might be.

But the United Church of Christ, as far as I can tell, is not so much about being like-minded. We don't have to agree; heck, we don't even have to *like* each other all the time! And that goes for *all* of us... people... pastor... we're bound to get frustrated with each other, but what holds us together is that we've made promises to stick with each other... in times of plenty, *and* in times of wilderness. What holds us together, what makes us the church, is covenant.

*I know, I know, I know, I know: You like to be comfortable.
I know, I know, I know, I know: You don't want to disagree.
But our God, our God, Is gonna set us free!*

*Because church, we are a covenant-making people.
And church: we're bound to sometimes clash.
But church: agreeing was never the point...
We can still love each other and laugh with each other
and hardly cause a splash!*

*Our opinions are not what hold us together.
Our thoughts, as lofty as they might sometimes seem
Are not the things that make us a body.
It's that we promise each other to stick with each other, like a family, like a team!*

And... just our luck! We get to remind ourselves of God's covenant with us in annual meeting right after worship today!

I get it: our annual meeting may seem like just another business meeting, just another way to take care of the mundane affairs of the church. But, y'all, *it's so much more than that!* This business that we do together – attending to the details and decisions of our shared life at St. Paul's United Church of Christ – this is part of what it looks like to be part of a covenant people! It may seem like just another business meeting, but what it *really* is, is an invitation to let God in, and to let God work through us, together.

Our God is a covenant-making God and calls us to the same. Not that we'll ever do it perfectly. But the thing is, because God is so good at this covenant thing, even when we're not, God is going to bring us back, here, to try, try again. And God will never fail us. God's promise is sure; God promise is perfect: "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge. You will be my people, and I will be your God."

Thanks be to God!