

November 4, 2012 Communion

We are about to hear one of the great 'stories' of the Hebrew Scriptures. It brings us an important message about what the ancient Jews called, "hesed"---loyalty and commitment. The story begins with a famine that forces Naomi and her family to flee Bethlehem for more productive land in Moab. There disaster strikes her family and then another famine which prompts Naomi to decide to move back to Bethlehem where she hopes to find some peace.

Ruth 1: 1-18

¹Once upon a time—it was back in the days when judges led Israel—there was a famine in the land. A man from Bethlehem in Judah left home to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. ²The man's name was Elimelech; his wife's name was Naomi; his sons were named Mahlon and Kilion—all Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They all went to the country of Moab and settled there.

³Elimelech died and Naomi was left, she and her two sons. ⁴The sons took Moabite wives; the name of the first was Orpah, the second Ruth. They lived there in Moab for the next ten years. ⁵But then the two brothers, Mahlon and Kilion, died. Now the woman was left without either her young men or her husband.

⁶One day she got herself together, she and her two daughters-in-law, to leave the country of Moab and set out for home; she had heard that GOD had been pleased to visit his people and give them food. ⁷And so she started out from the place she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law with her, on the road back to the land of Judah.

⁸After a short while on the road, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, "Go back. Go home and live with your mothers. And may GOD treat you as graciously as you treated your deceased husbands and me. ⁹May GOD give each of you a new home and a new husband!" She kissed them and they cried openly.

¹⁰They said, "No, we're going on with you to your people."

¹¹But Naomi was firm: "Go back, my dear daughters. Why would you come with me? Do you suppose I still have sons in my womb who can become your future husbands? ¹²Go back, dear daughters—on your way, please! I'm too old to get a husband. Why, even if I said, 'There's still hope!' and this very night got a man and had sons, ¹³can you imagine being satisfied to wait until they were grown? Would you wait that long to get married again? No, dear daughters; this is a bitter pill for me to swallow—more bitter for me than for you. GOD has dealt me a hard blow."

¹⁴Again they cried openly. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law good-bye; but Ruth embraced her and held on.

¹⁵Naomi said, "Look, your sister-in-law is going back home to live with her own people and gods; go with her."

¹⁶But Ruth said, "Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; ¹⁷where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me GOD—not even death itself is going to come between us!"

¹⁸When Naomi saw that Ruth had her heart set on going with her, she gave in.
Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

Sermon – What loyalty looks like ---not points for a free movie or flight!

March 12, 1929 – Maclean's "Shoppers and Aeroplan face lawsuits for loyalty program changes."

In response to this article someone replied:

Pauncho51 . 7 months ago

I was a long time Air Canada customer having collected many hundreds of thousands of points/year. Aeroplan's policies of never having seats available unless booked years in advance to unpopular destinations and the latest points expiry change resulted in me changing my remaining 50K Aeroplan points over to Esso cash cards for gasoline purchases with Points.com

OH YEAH AND I ALSO fly exclusively West Jet and no more Air Canada. Good bye and go away you miserable company that cannot even maintain decent relations with its employees!!

I can relate to this as I, too, discovered that my Aeroplan points had "expired."

It's not like a jug of milk left out on the counter in July!! – how can points expire?

Today's passage is about loyalty on several levels BUT though we should start with a more general look at our experiences of loyalty.

Maritz Insights is a report on loyalty programs in Feb 2012 in CANADA.

Key findings include:

- 92% of consumers are a member of at least one loyalty program.
 - Consumers hold an average of 6.4 loyalty cards.
 - Consumers earning over \$125,000 hold an average of 12.3 cards.
- 63% of consumers say they are more likely to continue doing business with a company that has a loyalty program.
- 78% of consumers shop strategically to accumulate points.
 - 35% of consumers have driven past a closer retailer to get to one where they can earn loyalties.

Moritz, based in Mississauga ON, concluded in their report:

"Consumers told us they are particularly loyal to programs which make them feel special, offer non-monetary privileges for members only and communicate often in ways that consumers find personally relevant and interesting."

The story of Naomi, Orpah and Ruth is a compelling tale about loyalty.

What is striking is when we join a loyalty program we do it with the clear expectation that we will "get" something.

In contrast, Ruth's loyalty to Naomi is about what she "gives" at great sacrifice and cost personally!!

What kind of deal is that??!!

Ruth should have gone back to her father's family to be safely married to a Moabite man who would take care of her – not glamorous BUT the safe and expected course of affairs.

Patricia Tull, OT professor at Louisville Seminary suggests that Ruth's loyal, absolute commitment to stay with Naomi is a sign of God's grace to Naomi.

Ruth is the embodiment of divine love and presence in one woman's life.

Loyalty to people/relationships is presented here as "faith in action" or "applied theology."

Ruth's actions is proof she is in for the long haul – and her love for Naomi was profound and unshakeable – even against all the events and social customs that would have allowed her to retreat with her dignity and reputation intact.

Loyalty in a Christian sense, is not something we do because it makes us feel good but because it is the faithful, just, God-like thing to do.

Loyalty/love = endures bad times, takes risks, has courage.

Law professor at Southern University and expert on divorce/alimony:

"Loyalty cannot be blueprinted. It cannot be produced on an assembly line. In fact, it cannot be manufactured at all, for its origin is the human heart - the center of self-respect and human dignity. It is a force which leaps into being only when conditions are exactly right for it - and it is a force very sensitive to betrayal." Maurice R. Franks

Ruth stood by Naomi and this incredible act of loyalty and commitment lead to the birth of David and to Jesus.

Ruth's decision is the core of Christian faith.

But consider our culture today as outlined in this quote from business expert and author Frederick F. Reichheld:

Loyalty is dead, the experts proclaim, and the statistics seem to bear them out. On average, U.S. corporations now lose half their customers in five years , half their employees in four and half their investors in one. We seem to face a future in which the only business relationships will be opportunistic transactions between virtual strangers.

The church of Christ is different.

- Loyalty, for us, is founded on God's love that always finds a way to meet us in our need.
- Loyalty is giving to sustain others in their need rather than serving self.
- Loyalty is honouring relationships where we experience the wonder and power of divine love.