

Sermon 08-31-2025
Friendship and Commitment – Rev. Markus Wegenast
Ruth 1:15-18

[Naomi] said, “Look, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” ¹⁶ But Ruth said,
“Do not press me to leave you,
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.
¹⁷ Where you die, I will die,
and there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”
¹⁸ When Naomi saw that [Ruth] was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

1)

Can family members be friends with each other? When you're family or when you become family through marriage or adoption, things change. It's a new level of relationship. We don't typically call a family member a friend, right?

And yet, at the same time, sometimes we do!

It's not unusual to hear words like “I'm married to my best friend” or you read heartwarming obituaries where the widow/er writes that they lived together with their most trusted friend, or a sister says that she's besties with her brother.

I don't want to tackle the question with you about the philosophical difference between a friend and a family member today – I want to talk with you about a certain quality that comes with each form of friendship – regardless of whether you consider family members to be friends or not. That quality is commitment.

Commitment is a beautiful quality in friendship.

Would you agree with that statement?

Commitment is a word we often use when it comes to marriage, but I think it is important for us to consider commitment in friendship from a biblical perspective.

Have you ever watched the TV show Judge Judy? I used to watch her regularly while I was fixing dinner in my house and it always broke my heart when they did those case introduction in the beginning. So often they have people who used to be friends but are now called former friends because of some legal battle they are in. “Former friends” – isn't that a heartbreaking title? I get so sad when I hear these introductions in the show when it says something like: “Here we have Jessica who is suing her former friend Kirstin over the wrongful use of their dog's leash...”

“Former friends” – it’s such a sad expression, it carries so much pain. When a friendship ends something happened to that beautiful thing called commitment.

Today’s story from the Bible introduces us to a friendship that is bathed in a commitment that won’t quit.

The book of Ruth in the Old Testament shows us the beauty of commitment. The story, though, starts with a tragedy that challenges everyone’s commitment to friendship.

2)

Here’s a quick background to the story:

Naomi is an Israelite woman who moves with her husband Elimelech to the country of Moab southeast of Israel due to a famine. They had two sons and when they became of age they married two Moabite women.

The names of those women were Orpah and Ruth, Naomi’s daughter’s in law.

Naomi & Elimelech

Son I & Orpah <> Son II & Ruth

So far so good – while moving to a foreign country and starting over was certainly difficult they got established there in Moab. The tragedy starts when one member of the family after the other dies. First Elimelech dies, then son I, the son II.

Naomi & Elimelech

~~Son I & Orpah~~ <> ~~Son II & Ruth~~

Now it’s only Naomi and her two daughters in law Orpah and Ruth.

This is a really bad situation for Naomi. Without a husband and without her two sons she was pretty much stranded. Orpah and Ruth didn’t have kids yet and back in the days that was a big issue because kids were something like the life insurance for families.

The three women live in Moab, all by themselves – it meant certain economic devastation – no social security and Medicaid yet. That is why Naomi thought the only option she had left was to return to her home country of Israel where she might find a relative who’d take her in – she was too old to remarry.

But what to do with her daughters in law, with Orpah and Ruth? They were still young, they could start over and find new husbands in Moab and have children with them.

So, Naomi feels the best and most loving solution is for her to send them away, to leave them behind in Moab while she would try to somehow make it back in Israel.

You may find it cruel that Naomi wants to send her daughter in law away, but it was actually an act of kindness. There was no point in taking these two young widows all the way to Israel – they were better off in Moab. This is the point where the story gets interesting.

Orpah takes Naomi up on her offer to be released from the family friendship. Under tears she bids her farewell. But Ruth can't do the same. She won't let her mother-in-law take off on a hard journey back to Israel alone. Ruth is determined to stick with her mother in law and in her determination, she speaks one of the most powerful, heartwarming expressions of commitment you can find:

“Do not press me to leave you, 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. – Ruth 1:16b

¹⁷ Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried...

Isn't that powerful? Especially when you consider the tragedy that lies behind those words. Three beloved men just died. Three widows, struck with grief are stranded, left behind, with no protection – and yet in this tragic moment of disaster Ruth comes up with these beautiful words.

This is a text from the Bible that sometimes gets chosen for readings at weddings.

(Can I tell you a secret? It was the text for our wedding as well, so Carrie and I have a special relationship with these words...)

I want to invite you today to apply the **commitment** that lies in these words to the friendships in your life.

Maybe you find it strange to think that these words can apply to your friendships. Typically, we don't think that being a true friend means that we will follow them when they move, or that we lodge where they lodge, or that we accept their religion. I hope you realize this is not what I mean when I say this is a beautiful expression of commitment.

The power that I see in these words from holy scripture lies in the tone of commitment to a friend that is present here.

...

I would like to share a childhood memory with you that really transformed the way I look at friendship. I have never had the chance to tell anyone about this, let alone preach about it, and so I'm really excited that today I share it with you:

In 6th grade I witnessed one of those typical class fights. During recess a group of fellow students got into a big argument – no idea what it was about, the gist of the

issue was that a group of students was mad at another student (sorry for bursting your bubble, yes, even in Germany kids get mad at each other in 6th grade!). Everyone was yelling at a girl except for one girl: Sandra. Sandra stood up for her friend who was under attack.

For me, as a fellow 6th grader, it was powerful to see that 12 year old Sandra was willing to take side with the unpopular girl. As Sandra stood up for her friend the group of students got even more mad and then also turned against Sandra.

“Why do you defend her? You know she is a terrible person,” they said.

And that’s when Sandra made a statement that caught my attention, and I have never forgotten about it since. This is what she said:

“Sie ist nunmal meine Freundin!”

That doesn’t help, does it?! It’s really hard to translate this into English, maybe that’s why I never before talked about it in a sermon. The German word “nunmal” is a very casual filler word that doesn’t have a direct translation in English.

I used some translation apps, and I think the best way to translate it is this:

“She is my friend and that’s just the way it is.”

She is my friend, and that’s just the way it is. Spoken by a 6th grade girl who stood up against a whole group of students who was out against another girl in the class.

I find there is so much power in these words. There is a level of commitment shining through this statement that can’t be messed with. Sandra admitted that her friend had some issues, she didn’t try to deny that – what she did was honor her friendship even though it would have been a lot easier not to.

Is this how you see friendship in your life? Do you stand up for your friends and stay with your friend even when the gist is to give up on the friendship?

That was the attitude that was in Ruth’s heart when it would have been easier to give up on Naomi and let her go back to her home country Israel by herself. But she was her committed friend (daughter in law) and that was just the way it was – couldn’t help it!

3)

Do you see God in this?

The story of Ruth has an important place in the Bible. All because she was committed to her friend, her mother in law Naomi. She followed her into Israel and started to believe in the God of Israel. This God of Israel used Ruth for great purposes.

Ruth became the great grandmother of King David. That would not have happened had she not been committed to following her mother in law back to Israel. Because Ruth became King David's great grandma that means that she became one of the great, great, great... (say that a couple of times) grandmother of Jesus. She even makes it into the otherwise predominantly male ancestry report of Jesus in Matthew's gospel (Matthew 1:5).

If you will, you can say: Because Ruth was committed in friendship, Jesus could eventually be born! That's pretty amazing, isn't it? It's amazing especially when you embrace the fact that in Jesus God shows us his commitment to us! Because God is committed to you through Jesus Christ, you are free to live out commitment to your friends and neighbors. Can we go as far as to say:

"God is your friend and that's just the way it is."

?

I put a question mark there because God doesn't force his friendship on anyone. You have a choice in the matter. God is committed to you, he proofed it to you in Jesus Christ – in his life, in his death on the cross, and in his resurrection. Are you responding to God's committed, beautiful friendship offer?

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You know, there is one more thing about the Ruth/Naomi story. We do not get an immediate reaction from Naomi about Ruth's heartwarming act of commitment. It's not until many weeks later (3:1) that Namoi expresses gratefulness for Ruth going with her, but initially we don't get this information.

Who knows, maybe Naomi was ignorant about it at first, maybe she didn't even appreciate it, she may have been so soaked up in her own grief that all she could think of was: *'O my, now I have to take care of my daughter in law too, as if my life wasn't hard enough already...'* She did not realize until later how essential Ruth's commitment to her would become.

Isn't that how it goes in our friendships? We don't always get an immediate reward when we stand up for our friends and show commitment against all the odds. I do not remember if the girl from 6th grade that was under attack showed any thankfulness when Sandra stood up for her saying "She's my friend and that's just the way it is." We don't always get immediate gratification for our good deeds – and that's ok!

There is beauty and gratification all by itself whenever you show commitment to your friends. On this holiday weekend - may you find new motivation and opportunities to show how committed you are to your friends. Commitment is a beautiful thing, God is a God of beauty and that's why he is committed to you as well. Say yes to it. Amen.