

“The Power of Promises”
by the Reverend Doctor Peter W. Allen
Hingham Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Hingham, Massachusetts
November 1, 2015

Ruth 1:1-18

Those of you who have children or have taken care of children will recognize this story: I was in the grocery store with my sons when they were little, probably 4 and 7 years old. We were in line and they saw the candy on near the checkout and asked if they could have some. Actually, it was more like: *Dad! Dad! Look at all that candy! Can I have some? Can I?*

Instead of giving in and buying candy for them just before dinner, and instead of simply saying *no*, I said, *Not right now, because we're about to go home to make dinner and we don't want to spoil your appetite. But, if you're good, the next time we come to the store, each of you can pick something out.*

The thing is, kids have a very strong sense of justice. At their young age, they still think that life is fair. So, the next time we were at the store together, a couple of weeks later, they held me to my promise and I came through, even though, once again, it was just before dinner!

The truth is that *promises are powerful.*

They are powerful in the way that they motivate us. When your boss promises you that you will receive a bonus for a certain level of performance, you will most likely try harder and everyone will benefit.

Promises are powerful in the way that they help us to hold steady, even when we are tired or frustrated or restless. When you've promised yourself that you will finish a marathon, even when you feel like quitting, you keep moving forward.

Marriage can be the most wonderful relationship imaginable, and it can be extremely challenging, sometimes at the very same time. Marriage vows can help keep us connected with our life partners through the seasons that feel more challenging than wonderful.

Promises are powerful in the way that, when broken, even for the right reasons, we feel devastated, not only in the moment, but sometimes for years afterward. I have a friend whose wife left him more than a decade ago. He was remarried recently and is very happy with his new bride, and yet, he continues to talk – all the time -- about his ex-wife and how much she hurt him by leaving.

In the story of Ruth, we see the power of a promise and the way that it creates a lifelong bond and a pathway toward transformation, even though that pathway is a plan B. I know about plan B's and they can turn out really well!

According to the Hebrew Scriptures, Ruth was King David's great grandmother. According to the New Testament, that would make her Jesus' ancestor as well. In the Jewish tradition, Ruth is an example of a faithful convert to Judaism, which she was.

Still, it's very surprising to me that the star of the Hebrew Bible (second only to Moses), King David himself, has a Moabite ancestor. Moab was located in modern day Jordan, which is ethnically mostly Arab. One half of today's Jordanians are descended from Palestinians, people who have been in constant conflict with the people of Israel, both in the stories of the Hebrew Bible and, of course, today.

King David, the one who the prophets remembered as the most important, powerful, and faithful king in their history, had Arab blood in him. If this story is about the power of faithfulness, of keeping our promises to those who are members of our own families, perhaps it also suggests that we expand what we mean by *family*, and that even our supposed enemies are our brothers and sisters and cousins.

For Ruth, the definition of family evolves. She is raised in Moab, where we can assume she has parents and siblings. But then she meets a group of people from the rival region of Judah, to the east.

There is a famine in Judah, and so a Jewish man named Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, immigrate to Moab with their two sons to find food. The sons marry local women, Orpah and Ruth. This household becomes Ruth's new family.

Sadly, all three of the men in the family die, and the three women, Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth, have decisions to make. Naomi tells her two daughters-in-law to go back to their own people, the Moabites, because Naomi plans to go home to Bethlehem.

In a tearful scene, Orpah decides to leave, but Ruth, surprisingly, pledges herself to the older woman with some of the most memorable words in the Bible:

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...

It sounds an awful lot like the vows we make when we get married. There is a feeling of permanence and finality to it.

And yet, sometimes, there is no choice and we must move on from a relationship. When there is abuse or neglect or when the love

drains away, never to return, it is time to go. I know that some of you have had to make that decision and I know how challenging and painful it is to do so.

Most of the time, though, keeping our promises is the *only* right choice. A father, absent for much of his son's childhood, promises to meet his son and never shows up. A mother, overwhelmed by the pressures of life and by addiction, breaks the inherent promise of motherhood and neglects her kids, abuses them, abandons them.

An older brother says he will take his younger brother to a ball game *some day*. And then that day arrives when the younger brother knows that *some day* will never come.

Broken promises can tear at our hearts.

Ruth has every reason to stay in Moab and go back to her family of origin, as Orpah does. They have food in Moab! The famine hasn't touched them. They speak her language there. Ruth would not have to prove herself worthy of acceptance. She is one of them. He is a Moabite.

In Bethlehem, Ruth would be seen as an outsider, maybe even as an invader, someone who would be competing with the local women for a husband.

Why would she put oneself in that situation? Why go to Bethlehem?

But... Ruth makes her promise to stick by her mother-in-law, Naomi, and goes with her.

Sometimes, we move on from a difficult situation by seeking a new life somewhere else. Maybe Ruth wants to live in a new place

so that God might provide a new pathway... and because she trusts Naomi more than anyone in the world.

Still, what a risk and what a gutsy woman!

I suggest that you read the rest of Ruth today when you get home from church. It is a very inspiring and heartwarming story – and it's nice and short!

I don't think I'm giving too much away by telling you that there is a happy ending. Ruth's courageous decision to stay with Naomi, despite the risks, pays off, and she becomes part of a new community of God's people. Her promise and her willingness to keep it, creates a new, life-giving reality for a whole cast of characters.

In the background, God, too, keeps the divine promise to give faithful people meaningful lives, full of love and connection.

Centuries later, Jesus makes a promise of his own. He tells his disciples that he will always be with them, sealing his promise with the bread and the cup... and with his life.

Amen