

November 8, 2015 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Commitment as Steadfast Love

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17 / Psalm 127 / Hebrews 9:24-28 / Mark 12:38-44

Our community was called to be a community of commitment. If we are to live fully the life we were created to live, following Jesus in the love of God, and of others as ourselves, we need to commit to and work with specific practices that ground and nourish us in God's love, and empower us to live out that love with one another and in the world. "Our Covenant One with Another" was the original statement of membership. In it we find these words: *Feeling that we receive strength and encouragement from a joint commitment to Jesus Christ, we members of the Church of the Covenant, do covenant with one another that each of us will ...* then follow seven spiritual disciplines or practices. The Covenant Members have been updating the statement of membership so that this idea of a shared commitment speaks to Covenant and Community Members. The revised statement thus far sounds like this: *As members of the Church of the Covenant, we receive strength, encouragement, and joy from a shared commitment to spiritual disciplines or practices that nurture the inward and outward dimensions of our lives and our faith. Faithful practice of these disciplines is the framework that enables us to grow in God's love and in service to others and the world.*

Responding to the call to be a community of commitment arises out of the deep insight that a disciplined spiritual life, inwardly and outwardly, harmonizes our lives with the very life of God. It is how we root ourselves in God, grow in God's love, and live as channels of God's love in and for the world. We need to do this within a community of those who are working with the same kind of life.

Let's look briefly at our readings for today with this in mind.

The Book of Ruth can be easily read in one sitting. Its core theme is the Hebrew word *chesed*, which is translated "loyalty". The best-known portion of the Book of Ruth is the dialogue between the Israelite widow Naomi and Ruth, one of her daughters-in-law. Naomi, her husband, and two sons had fled Judah because of famine, into the country of Moab. Naomi's husband and sons, who had taken Moabite wives, die. She decides to go home when the famine is over. On the road with her daughters-in-law, Naomi pauses to tell them that they are free to return home, that she does not expect them to go with her. Orpah does return home. Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi, with beautiful words of loyalty and love: "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.”(1:16-17).

That scene and those words express eloquently the theme of the whole book: Steadfast love, or commitment to the well-being of something or someone beyond oneself. It is the true way of living for human beings created in the image of God, who IS *chesed*, steadfast love.

Our reading for today continues the theme. Naomi is aging, and is concerned for Ruth's well-being. She instructs her to dress herself up and to go to meet with Boaz, a “kinsman”. The scene is intentionally ambiguous, in that the author uses particular words that have sexual meanings. However, there is far more to it than a sex scene gratuitously thrown in to keep our interest! [Edward F. Campbell, Jr., Ruth, The Anchor Bible, p. 132] This is certainly a sexual encounter. This is only one of many examples in scripture that make it impossible to impose our ideas about “family values” or “traditional marriage” on scripture. There is something more serious going on here, beyond pious personal or cultural morality. It has to do with *chesed*. Boaz, finding Ruth with him there on the threshing floor, having fallen asleep from a bit too much wine, vows to take care of and marry her. He particularly praises Ruth's reputation with everyone as a “worthy woman” of loyalty (*chesed*).

The story continues to unfold in a fascinating way, but the point is that the threshing floor scene is another moment when human beings are presented the opportunity to make commitments, to live in steadfast love. As it ends up, all the small and great decisions for loyalty, or steadfast love, make for a major unfolding of God's purposes. Boaz and Ruth are married. Ruth bears a son, who is the grandfather of the greatest of the kings of Israel, David. Imagine that! A non-Israelite is the great-grandmother of King David, in whose lineage Jesus is found! A non-Israelite immigrant who plays a major role in what God is trying to do for the world! Everything in the story of Ruth is on the human level. That is the ennobling message of the book. We human beings are created to live in the way of *chesed*, of commitment and steadfast love. We could say that this is the central theme of the Bible as a whole. The stories show humans sometimes being extraordinarily faithful and committed, and other times failing badly. Yet in and through it all, the purposes of God for life are worked out.

We need to see Jesus in the context of *chesed*, of steadfast love, of commitment of one's life to something larger than only ourselves. The central teaching of Jesus was loving God with our whole being, and loving others as we love ourselves. These days we must add loving the creation of God of which we are part. The Letter to the Hebrews pictures Jesus as the ultimate high priest who makes a sacrifice to God that benefits all humanity. That

sacrifice, that offering is his own life. Jesus “bears the sins of many” as he offers his whole life to God. “Sin” in this case can be understood as ways of living that are not *chesed*, that are not for the wider love that sees beyond the self. Like the other writings in the New Testament, the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews is using images to try and express the meaning of Jesus' life for us. In that culture, the image of priest carried significant meaning, as did the image of sacrifice. The sense of it is, Jesus so fully lived out in his own life the message that he taught, he so embodied love of God and of others, that his life had the power of an offering given that benefits all of us. His life opens the way for us to live the life of *chesed*, of commitment in love and for love. His life empowers us in that life, ignites in us the light and the energy of steadfast love, of a loyalty to life that harmonizes with God's presence and purposes within the whole of the creation.

Finally, there is the story in Mark of Jesus and the scribes, and of the poverty-stricken widow. Here we see opposing ways of living—the self-centeredness and arrogance of the scribes, cloaked in religion, and the completely trustful giving of the widow. Jesus says to his disciples, “Beware of the scribes.” The word means to watch carefully, to scrutinize, to really see what is going on. Jesus is saying, look at how these people live. It is a sham, a pretense, a fraud. They appear to be very religious, yet it is all to build themselves up. More than that, they get rich from “devouring” the livelihood of widows, those who are poor and most vulnerable in society. Jesus sees clearly that great wealth is not derived without the impoverishing of others.

Jesus is consistent about this: we are known by our actions, not by our “beliefs” or our positions in society, religious or otherwise. Our actions have their own consequences. That is why he says that the scribes will receive the greater condemnation. Jesus understood that self-centered living, exploitation of others, the pursuit of wealth and power, whether in the realm of religion or society, leads to an empty, vain life, and is destructive to self and others.

Jesus now goes over to the temple and positions himself so that he can watch people as they deposit their offerings in the designated receptacles. Here come the wealthy, dropping in large sums, and probably making a show of it. Suddenly, something catches Jesus' eye. A widow who is poor. The word used here means “abject poverty”. She is poverty-stricken, but she wants to give her offering. Two small coins, which amount to a penny. Jesus is dumb-founded. He calls the disciples. “Look here,” he says. “Do you see that woman? She is below the poverty line, and yet she has given an astounding offering. Everything she has, her whole living.” The words here literally mean, “her whole life”.

There is the contrast, and Jesus wants us to “beware”, to “observe”, to pay attention,

because our lives and how we live them depend on it. On the one hand, there is ego-centered living, as though the world exists for my own comfort and success, prosperity and power. In reality, that is the way that leads to ruin, for oneself and others. On the other hand, there is the way of *chesed*, of steadfast love and commitment of one's who life to something larger than oneself, to life, to God and God's gracious presence and purposes. It is living as though I exist for the sake of the whole world! There is a painful, tragic element to this scene. This widow's utter trust of her life to God, her complete self-giving, is the very thing that is exploited by those in power, in the temple and in society. And yet, Jesus knows, and wants us to understand deeply, that, even so, it is the way of the widow that brings about life. He said it in the Sermon on the Mount. To whom does the kingdom, the realm of God, belong? The poor and poor in spirit. Who is it that will inherit the earth? The meek, those whose lives are open to what God is doing and who give themselves to it.

The life of commitment as steadfast love is lived out in the day-to-day things, the choices we make, the ways we use our time and energy, the things to which we give ourselves. That is what this community is and has been about from the beginning. We recognize that God's *chesed*, God's steadfast and redemptive love, is lived out through our own lives. And so the commitments we make and how we work with them make a difference, not only in our own lives but in the life that is around us.

We are a community of commitment to particular practices that not only guide and deepen our own lives in God, but give encouragement to others who are likewise working with this life of *chesed*, of steadfast love. That is why when we do not take them seriously, do not work with them as faithfully as we can, it affects the community. When we fall into neglecting of time alone for our inward journey. When we decide that we will not go to worship this Sunday because the minister is not there or because we do not particularly care for what is planned. When we avoid the work of forgiveness in regard to a particular person. When we make commitments but do not take them to heart, it affects the community. And of course the reverse is true. When we are working with our commitments as best we can, whether we feel very good about our progress or not. When we are sharing with others how we are doing, where we are struggling and where we are feeling some growth. When we are giving of our material lives and our selves in an ever-increasing measure. When we are growing in the challenges, the understanding, and the joy of *chesed* living, the life of steadfast love in commitment, we awaken more and more to our true selves, and we help others to awaken, as well. Working as faithfully as we can with the commitments, with the *chesed*-life, we have chosen, harmonizes us with and makes us channels of God's steadfast

love for the world.

The time ahead for this community is exciting. I am NOT talking about when you may have another minister. I am talking about what is happening now, and what will happen as you continue to live your life together, this life of commitment as steadfast love. I have said it before and I say it again: you already, right now, have everything you need to be the Church of the Covenant. It does not depend upon a hired, professional minister. It is about each of you and the commitments you have made and are working with as Covenant and Community Members, the growth in the inward and outward journey that is happening in and among you. That is where the light is, where the power is, where the love is. That is where God is, and is working.