

“The Covenant of Love”

Sermon by Pastor Dan Harrison, Church of the Covenant, 11/4/18

The story of Ruth and Naomi in the Bible, is a story of a covenant of love. I don't think I realized that until my wedding day when my own wife, Ruth, quoted these very words to me during our exchange of vows: “Where you go, I will go. Where you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, your god my god. Where you die, I will die and that's where I will be buried—not even death will come between us.” What a vow to make, what a promise to keep. I didn't think about it at the time, twenty-two years ago, the true depths of what she was committing to when my own wife made this vow to me, but I would learn over the years the depth of its meaning as we confronted the pain of acculturation. She had never lived away from her family, from her people, from her language. She had grown up in a city 95% Hispanic, Spanish and English spoken fluently everywhere, typically a combination of both, an amazing culture of hospitality and the best food I have ever eaten—a mestizo culture dating back to the 1500s, one of the oldest “new world” cultures in the United States—but she was willing to give it all up for me. And that's exactly what she did. She followed me, as we moved to Northern California to attend seminary and then to Northern Nevada to finish graduate school. In each new setting, she suddenly became the minority—a feeling few of us understand or relate to. She had never been followed in a store by security until she entered into these majority-culture spaces where she was seen as suspect, as the “other.” When 9/11 happened, she was accosted and harassed at the University of Nevada campus because she looked like the enemy; when she would board any airplane for nearly a decade, she was chosen in the “random” body checks for additional security vetting. We could have turned back and returned to her home in El Paso, where she was safe, where she was no longer treated suspiciously, but we somehow hung in there, and she continued to follow me, around the world. This pain would pass to our children who would see their own mother singled out and harassed at various times because of the color of her skin, whether picked out as a member of the South Asian working class in the Arabian peninsula, even being struck by her “Arab superior” or labeled a “suspicious Palestinian” by Israeli soldiers and detained on the West Bank border with a machine gun pointed squarely to her chest the whole time—ironically at the same place that Ruth and Naomi returned to in their story, where Ruth from the Bible lived out her promise to Naomi. And so, my Ruth, in the same place along the West Bank, southwest of Jerusalem, serendipitously confronted racism while living out her promise to me. And why? Because she loved me? Sure, but I would say it is because of the strength of her Covenant of love. She believes in the covenant itself; her word is her bond—regardless of the personal pain she may face in the process of fulfilling it.

So I ask you, what does the word “covenant” mean to you? (pause for audience response)

The power of the idea of “covenant” does not escape notice in our community, as our very name re-enforces it. We are the “Church of the Covenant.” Interestingly, when I first learned of this community last year, the name made me wonder “what covenant are they ascribing to?” And surely, as people are just now learning about us, they too ask the same question. To be frank, our name seems to smack a bit of the ancient covenant made by Abraham with God referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures, and then if not that one, then surely perhaps the New Covenant made with the people and God through Christ—referred to in our Christian Scriptures. Interestingly, though, as many if not all of you know, it is *neither* to which our name refers. It, instead, refers to Our Covenant, One with Another—a covenant we make to each other to take seriously a set of disciplines for our inward and outward spiritual work. Similar, to

the Covenant of Love that Ruth makes to Naomi, or that my Ruth made to me, Our Covenant One with Another is our commitment to seek God, to commune with this community of faith, and to love the world around us. In all cases, these are Covenants of Love.

The Covenant of Love can be seen in the interaction Jesus has with one of the teachers of the law in Mark 12. The man asks Jesus which commandment is the greatest. To which Jesus answers with the foundations of Judaism itself. First, he answers with the Shema (or as Muslims call it, the Shahada), “The Lord our God, the Lord is one,” acknowledging the monotheistic divinity of God. This showed that he wasn’t peddling a new religion—though I am sure the teachers standing around were suspicious of exactly that. Then Jesus goes on to share the command to love God with everything you have, but then as if the other side of the same coin, reminds them that it is equally important to love your neighbor as yourself. These principles are praised by the leaders who are listening simply because they were correct and indisputable. I have always speculated that Jesus could have stopped with “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind” and the leaders would have been satisfied—for that was truly the answer they were looking for. However, I believe Jesus thought this to be an opportunity to frame his entire ministry within the context of the second commandment—which I believe Jesus thought to be perhaps more important than the first in that it was the perfect demonstration of how much we truly love God in how much you and I love our fellow humans. Love your neighbor in fact becomes Jesus’ obvious guiding principle throughout his entire ministry. This seems to be the missing ingredient in his day’s institutional religion: There wasn’t much loving one’s neighbor going on. The Covenant of Love had disappeared into the shadows of history and Jesus was resurrecting it. He said, in fact, there is no greater love than laying one’s life down for others. This was the epitome of love being lived out in the world. Regardless of the pain, love overrides all. I saw this in my wife Ruth, over and over—and see it still today. So, I want to encourage us to take personal vows of love, adopting a Covenant of Love in everything we do. As we journey together, understanding that there may be pain in our stories, but there is love in our hearts. Let us love one another as God has loved us—graciously, forgivingly, patiently, and outwardly.

Peace.