Why We Take The Vows:
Membership in a Spiritual Community

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Evanston, IL
July 19, 2015

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—
there will I be buried.

—Ruth 1:16-17

Invitation to Worship: (from 1 John 4)
Dearly Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God.
All who love are born of God and know God.
God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God.
And God abides in them.

Ancient Witness: Ruth 1:1-18

I was watching an episode of “The West Wing” several years ago when the main character, Jeb Bartlett, who is the President of the United States, is suffering from a flare up of MS, which had left him unable to walk. There is one particular scene in his bedroom where his wife helps him as they both struggle to put on his pants. As they are doing this he says wistfully, “This is why they make you take the vows.”

You can tell that he’s feeling embarrassed. The character is someone who is extremely bright, capable and independent. Here he is now, weak, vulnerable and suffering the indignity of needing his wife to put on his pants. “This is why they make you take the vows,” he says.

My mind went to those vows that I have helped so many couples, gay and straight couples, say over the years: “I promise before God and these witnesses, to be your loving and faithful partner; in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live.”

And my mind recalled so many couples through the years when one had fallen into sickness or sorrow or want, and the other had demonstrated such devotion, love and patience for the other.

During most of my career I’ve required quite rigorous premarital counseling with couples, in part, so they can understand fully the nature of those vows that they want to take. Often this full awareness takes years, and I can only hope to help lay the groundwork for it.

For when things are starting out—when things are going well—when there is joy and plenty and health—the vows don’t really matter then. It is when life progresses that they do. When there is inevitable struggle and hardship—sickness, want or sorrow—the vows come into play.

When couples get married, we say that they enter a covenant, the “covenant of marriage.” A covenant is when people make promises to each other, but it is not one-sided. It is not just one making a promise to another. A covenant is when both parties promise—when there are mutual promises.
This is difficult to understand sometimes because of a tendency to romanticize marriage. It is often identified with feelings—feelings of desire and happiness. And when the feelings wax or wane—when there is struggle and sorrow—the marriage often ends. But feelings come and go. Not that divorce isn’t sometimes necessary or even good sometimes, but how sad to have them so frequently. (I have been divorced!)

But this isn’t a sermon against divorce. This is a sermon in favor of vows. And if we are honest, we break our vows all the time. Whenever we are not loving partners. Whenever we are not truly honest and withhold ourselves from the other. And so we all fall short, but that doesn’t mean that making vows still can’t be a good thing.

When we make a promise, we impose upon ourselves. We declare what our best intentions are, and then we hold ourselves accountable to these intentions. But living by our best intentions is not dependent on feelings. Indeed, we make a promise precisely because we know that we will need something more than our feelings. We know that we will need something external to push us through the hard times. Promises are about putting structures or boundaries on ourselves because we know that we are going to need them.

And so we often speak of the “bonds of holy matrimony.” These are bonds that we voluntarily put on ourselves. These are commitments we make. And when we honor our commitments and promises, there are times when they will feel restrictive because living by our best intentions 24/7 isn’t easy, especially when times get tough.

“This is why we take the vows.” Because we need them. We’re human. Making a vow means that we foresee a time that we will need the extra help. The “bonds” can be a good thing, not a negative thing. We voluntarily put them on for when we will need them. And if you really believe the promises you’ve made—in the end you will experience them as a blessing and not a curse.

The promise we make in marriage is to be a faithful partner: “to love, honor and cherish,” to give emotional and physical and material support. It’s to recognize that one of you may become sick or vulnerable and need help, and when that happens, the other will be there. To live in this covenant is a blessing—to trust the other and to be trusted.

You know, whenever I have officiated same sex weddings for many years, the couple usually was not able to obtain legal status. But we did them anyway, and the worship service was identical. We do them anyway because it is important to proclaim what we believe and bear witness to the blessing in our lives. And we did them because the vows and promises we make “before God and these witnesses” are important.

And there are couples I know who choose to forego the legal status. Some have done that in solidarity with their gay and lesbian friends. Some do that because they are of advanced age and the legal status would only complicate their estates and trusts for their families. But they still might want to take the vows and make their promises publically, celebrating their love and commitment to each other. Call me old-fashioned, but I think this is a beautiful thing.

In our scripture reading today, we have a couple, Elimelech and Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, leave Judah because of a famine to settle in Moab. There are a lot of reasons for immigration, as we know, and in today’s story the main characters are immigrants, resident aliens, strangers or sojourners.
Then Elimelech dies, and Naomi is left only with her two sons. Eventually, these two sons take Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth, and both couples are married about 10 years without any children.

This is important because children were essential for future survival. This is one reason why they were counted as such a blessing in the Bible—they were security. Children were like a pension fund, Social Security and Medicare all rolled into one.

Well, Mahlon and Chilion die, and all hope—present and future—seems cut off. Naomi, Ruth and Orpah were now childless widows, and this was disastrous. It was one of the most vulnerable positions in which to be. It meant to be stripped of identity and security in the male-dominated society. On her own, a woman had no status—nothing. With no male presence they now have no life-support.

So Naomi says to her daughters-in-law, “return to you mother’s house.” There they will have a legal protection, security and greater chances for remarriage. She continues, “may the Lord grant that you may find security in the house of your husband.”

Naomi was older—beyond the age of remarrying. She had given up on herself and was telling these two, “Look, I’m a lost cause. Don’t let me drag you down. Save yourselves.” She says, “Call me no longer Naomi (pleasant), call me Mara (bitter), for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.” (v. 20) A paraphrase might read: “Do not call me Sweetie, call me instead Sourpuss.”

It’s interesting that the heroes here in the sacred Hebrew text are not Hebrew; they are Moabites. The models for God are outsiders.

Orpah is the sane and reasonable one. She sadly kisses her mother-in-law good-bye. “But,” our story says, “Ruth clung to her.” Naomi says, “Why don’t you get some sense like Orpah?” But Ruth still clung to her. By the way, this is the same word used in the creation story: “A man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” This is the kind of commitment and loyalty that God intends for all human relationships. This is how we are created. And this is the kind of commitment and loyalty that Ruth demonstrates. She embodies hesed, which is often translated as “kindness.” But this doesn’t really capture the full meaning. Johanna Bos, who was my Hebrew professor in seminary (she also happens to be my stepmother) taught me that probably the best English word for hesed is “loyalty.” It’s about being steadfast and true.

Ruth, the non-Jew, the non-religious one, demonstrates a key aspect of God, herself, who is utterly loyal to humanity, who never leaves us, who clings to us, who never abandons us, who has taken a vow and is steadfast, loving and true.

And then we have some of the most beautiful words in all of literature spoken by Ruth:

Entreat me not to abandon you,  
to turn from following you.  
For where you do, I go,  
where you sleep, I sleep;  
your people will be my people;  
your god, my god.  
Where you die, I die,  
and there I will be buried.
Even at the possibility of her own death, Ruth sticks by Naomi and declares her solidarity with her. She says her vows.

And so there are different ways we live in covenant with others. Early in my years as a minister, I knew someone who thought we should do away with this category called “church member.” He thought it was too exclusive and just set up boundaries between people. Was Ruth being exclusive when she made her vow to Naomi?

Why have members? Well, I told him, I believe the vows are important. It’s important to make our promises and hold ourselves accountable to those promises. This is what a member is—someone who enters into a covenant with a congregation. We put that external structure on ourselves because we know, sooner or later, we are going to need it.

When I started The Gathering, a congregation in Cincinnati, we went many years without having a category of “member.” There were many who thought it was too exclusive and created boundaries. But we eventually realized that we were missing something important.

Churches like Lake Street welcome, of course, those who will never be members or take the vows. But at the same time, we hold up membership—taking the vows and following through with them—as an important good. Both for the community and for the individual.

And so we state it publicly; we go on record. We look into each other’s eyes and say, “You can count on me.” (In fact, if you are so moved, at the passing of the peace at the end of worship, you might say this to others: “You can count on me.”)

It seems to me that being part of a spiritual community and living with hesed—loyalty is very important to the spiritual journey. It has nothing to do with who is in or out, who is better or chosen or not. It’s not about the “privileges of membership” but taking on the responsibilities of membership.

The covenant for this congregation takes about promising to be “mutually supportive to each other” and to “support the church community.” This involves financial support, attending worship, and pitching in doing the internal and external work of the church.

Now sometimes there are conditions that prevent us from fulfilling our promises as we would like—conditions such as financial hardship or failing health. There are legitimate reasons sometimes for being unable to follow through, and this is no failure, of course.

And many times even if we are able, promises aren’t kept. We make mistakes; we’re human. But we still make ourselves accountable. It involves forgiving and being forgiven. But it doesn’t do anybody any favors to tell them that the vows they’ve made don’t matter—that a life of hesed, of loyalty, of commitment and integrity, doesn’t matter. It matters to community, but it also matters to that person. In fact, living one’s vows might be more important than any sermon one can hear. To underscore this, I know of churches that wipe their membership rolls clean and ask people to renew their vows each year. How’s that for outside the box!

And we realize that it is God’s grace that sustains us and enables us to make our vows in the first place. The vows are an affirmation of God’s sustaining presence! We acknowledge that we rely on it.

This is why we take the vows!
Because finally and ultimately
we know
that we may stumble and fail.
But God has made vows, too,
and will always keep them.
Always.
And to realize this—
this divine, steadfast love and devotion with no strings and remarkable loyalty—
is why we’re here.

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)

Call to Commitment: Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos
The God of ancient Israel is the God of loyalty, devotion, kindness, in Hebrew hesed. In God’s alliance with ancient Israel there is no advantage for God. At the time of the Exodus, God clung to the weakest and most oppressed group around. God’s people are called to show the same behavior toward one another that God showed them. The life of hesed is a characteristic of the people who claim to be God’s people.