

## CELEBRATING GENEROSITY

Celebrating Commitment

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Ruth 1:16-18

<sup>16</sup>*But Ruth said,*

*'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.*

<sup>17</sup>*Where you die, I will die—*

*there will I be buried.*

*May the LORD do thus and so to me,*

*and more as well,*

*if even death parts me from you!'*

In the world of public relations and marketing *brand loyalty* is a commonly used catch phrase and a concept that has become an increasingly big deal over the last several decades. In fact, a 1990 article in the Harvard Business Review argued that brand loyalty was the ultimate goal of marketing. When business executives and marketers use the phrase brand loyalty, they are referring to a person's desire to repeatedly buy the same brand or product or service. In the late 1990's we saw a resurgence in the cola wars as Pepsi and Coke jockeyed for an increased share of the market. Over the last couple of years one of the big arenas of competition has been between Apple computers and PCs. In an attempt to demonstrate and influence brand loyalty Apple has run those clever commercials where the hip young Mac and the stodgy stuffy PC introduce themselves and then share a brief interaction, always illustrating why Macs should be preferred.

Today is a big day in worship here at Ridge Church. We have passed out and you have completed surveys about mission priorities for the church, we have celebrated 50<sup>th</sup> and other anniversaries, and Kevin has shared some remarks on behalf of the finance

committee regarding this year's stewardship campaign. All three of these things are related to a very important topic that is worth spending some time on this morning – that topic is commitment. Our stewardship campaign this year is called Celebrating Generosity and this morning we start that campaign by talking about and celebrating commitment.

Whenever I think about commitment, I think of the story of Ruth. Ruth's story, is one of the greatest examples and illustrations of commitment in the Bible. As Ruth's story opens she speaks some powerful words that I imagine are familiar to many of you. *"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. <sup>17</sup>Where you die, I will die-- there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"*

If you've heard these words before, where did you hear them? Have you ever heard them read at a wedding? Maybe some of you even used these beautiful words from scripture at your wedding. While these words that Ruth speaks are moving and powerful words that speak profoundly about the commitments that two people make when they covenant with each other, this is not the original context in which these words were spoken.

These words were originally spoken by Ruth to Naomi, her mother-in-law. And with the words that she speaks in these verses Ruth is committing herself to Naomi in a way that is much richer and potentially much more meaningful than we usually give these words credit for when we take them out of context. Ruth and her sister Orpah are Moabites who have married Naomi's sons while Naomi and her family were in exile

looking for food. When we as the readers enter into the story all three of the men in Naomi and Ruth and Orpah's lives have passed away and Naomi plans to return home to Bethlehem because she has heard that there is food there once again. Ruth and Orpah begin to head that way with her, but as they approach the border Naomi pleads for them to return to their own families and Orpah does so willingly.

However, Ruth's response shows an incredible level of commitment to Naomi as she recites those poetic words. Ruth vows to go with Naomi to her homeland, to lodge with her, to make Naomi's people her people, and to make Naomi's God her God. This commitment then is even beyond our traditional wedding, "till death do us part" because Ruth states, "where you die, I will die – Ruth vows to be with Naomi even beyond death. This is a powerful commitment.

A big part of what makes Ruth's commitment to Naomi so powerful is that her actions are motivated and driven by the biblical concept of *hesed* – loving kindness. You see, Ruth wasn't required by law, nor would she have been expected by custom, to remain with her mother-in-law following the death of her husband. Her actions then must be understood to be an act of *hesed*. Ruth feels a deep sense of connection to Naomi because Naomi has shown her loving kindness – the *hesed* of God. Just as Naomi has taken in Ruth, a foreigner, and shown her loving kindness, Ruth vows to show the same to her.

The level of commitment that Ruth shows to Naomi in this story can play out in each of these areas that we celebrate and commemorate today. The mission surveys that you filled out earlier this morning are going to be used by your mission leadership team to prioritize and plan mission activities for the coming year. As opportunities to serve are

then placed in front of the congregation I encourage you all to prayerfully consider the ways in which you might be involved with the mission ministries of Ridge Church. We are not called to be in mission out of a sense of obligation or guilt. Trust me, your mission leadership understands that people are busy and have extremely full plates.

However, we would encourage you to get involved out of a sense of *hesed*.

Acknowledging all the loving-kindness that God has shown to each and every one of us we are called to respond by sharing acts of loving kindness with others throughout the entire world.

Ruth's story also provides us with a powerful example of commitment when it comes to our relationships and the connections and commitments that we share with one another. Whether you were recognized for celebrating a 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary today, whether you have just been married for a few years, or whether you and your partner have just begun your relationship, Ruth has much to teach about commitment. Through Ruth's story we see that commitment is not about what makes us comfortable, it is not about doing the bare minimum in a situation, but rather it is about a way of life, and about making choices and sticking to them understanding that the commitments are not just to other people, but to God as well.

Finally, Ruth's story speaks to us about the importance of commitment in ways that can inspire and challenge us as we prepare to make our pledges to the church in the coming weeks. Ruth's commitment to Naomi, to follow her back to Bethlehem, was a huge sacrifice on her part. But, it was a sacrifice that was made again out of a sense of *hesed*, an act of loving kindness in response to God's loving kindness.

While brand loyalty is a big concept in the business world today, the reality of much of this loyalty is that it is fleeting. As a culture we are quick to make commitments that often end up being short lived and sometimes barely even resemble a commitment. Many of us have a strong preference when it comes to the type of cola we drink, but we'll drink whatever is available. Many of us are likely committed to a television show that we don't want to miss, but it might be a different television show next season. And many of us are committed to sports teams – when they're playing well.

Unfortunately, part of our human nature is that we are fickle and that our commitments are often fleeting. And it's not just when it comes to cola and TV and sports teams, this same type of fickleness often translates over into deeper commitments in our lives as well. In relationships today, romantic relationships and friendships alike, people often connect with others to the extent that it benefits them. We'll be friends with someone, we'll engage with someone and desire to spend time with someone as long as it makes us happy or strengthens us or allows us to feel as if we're benefiting in some way or another.

Outside of our human relationships this also happens a great deal with our connections to communities and sometimes even to God. People come to and connect with a church when they are getting exactly what they want from the church, people connect to God and feel close to God when God's love for them is emphasized. But, as soon as a church begins to challenge people to turn around and to serve others in the world, as soon as the emphasis on God becomes God's love for others – even those who might be quite different than us – people struggle to stay committed to a particular church and sometimes they even begin to lose the connection they once had with God. It is easy

to be committed to something when it benefits us, but much more difficult to remain committed when it begins to challenge us in order to benefit others.

As Christians though, we are called to commit ourselves to things worthwhile and to do so because God has made commitments to us. As Christians we have committed to following in the life, teaching, and example of Jesus who showed radical commitment to God and to a way of living that honored God. Through the power of God's love made known to us through the spirit and the risen Christ we are to live out those commitments that we have made. We can't do this via our own strength, we can only do it through the love of God that fills us and inspires us.

As we all go forth from this place today let us be challenged to stay committed in our relationships – relationships to partners or siblings or friends – even when it would be easier to walk away. Let us be challenged to stay committed to our call to serve others through missions so that mission projects might not simply be things we can pick and choose to do, but rather so that missions can be a way of living. And Let us be challenged to be committed and faithful stewards, so that we might be able to share our prayers, our presence, our gifts, and our service with our church family to make a difference in our community and throughout the world.

Commitment is difficult. Commitment asks us to make sacrifices. But as people of faith we can rejoice and celebrate God's commitment to us that allows us to make and to uphold commitments to others, to those things that truly matter. This is the loyalty we are called to have – not a loyalty to a cola, or a computer, or a sports team, but loyalty to God and to God's work in the world.