

Sermon Text for March 27, 2022

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Song of Solomon 8:6-7, Ruth 1:15-18 *“What loyalty looks like”*

In 1976 my family moved to the United States from Rome, Italy in the midst of the red brigade terrorist times in Italy. As a third grader who loved anything sports I knew what soccer team I loved in Serie A, Roma, but I had no idea who I was supposed to cheer for in all these new professional sports that I became aware. So I chose all of the teams that had won their respective championships in 1976, NHL Montreal Canadiens, Baseball I chose the most successful team, Yankees, basketball another New York team, Knicks, and of course, America's team for football.

Now, 46 years later guess what my favorite teams are still? Canadiens, Yankees, Knicks, and of course, Cowboys. You just can't change your sports teams based upon whether they win or they lose, your loyalty can't be based upon whether people do what they want you to do or not. Sports is an insignificant example when we ultimately talk about loyalty, especially when we are talking about people, and relationships and God. Loyalty is required of us, just as we have to be secure in knowing that God is loyal to us, even while we were yet sinners type loyal.

But loyalty can be dangerous if we align ourselves to the wrong people, the wrong institutions, the wrong ideologies, the wrong theologies, the wrong passions and desires. Anything to which we align with our loyalties which leads us away from God has to be avoided by us, we have to run away from it. To what are you loyal? Scripture tells us not to be unequally yoked, don't marry someone who doesn't love the same God you do. Friends, do they take you closer or further from God? To what are you loyal? Well, that isn't what our sermon title is, our title is: This is what loyalty looks like.

Both of our Scriptures address loyalty and answers that question of what does loyalty look like. Both of these Scriptures are also very, very similar, but notice we don't have a New Testament Scripture for today? These are both Scriptures that I use consistently in my work, one for funerals and one for weddings. One addresses the loyalty that we ought to have for each other, the wedding Scripture from Song of Solomon. The addresses the loyalty that God has for us in the book of Ruth. Let's read.

READ

One wedding that I used the Song of Solomon verse I was speaking about verse 6 and especially the passion that is required in the love for a husband and wife and the fire that is hot

and flashing, when the flowers behind me actually caught on fire. Everyone thought it was a great sermon example. But the loyalty that is required in a marriage is described in these verses as one person setting a seal upon their arm, a seal upon their hearts. Similar to a tattoo that is impressed upon the person because that person will never, ever allow the one to whom they are loyal to leave their minds or their hearts.

We read in Jeremiah how God says that he will set his covenant upon our hearts, like this seal upon your heart. This is our understanding of how we ought to be loyal not only to our spouses, but also to each other. By what parameters do we gauge our loyalty and do agree to be loyal? What is most important to us about a person that we agree to be loyal to them? Is it if they say what we want them to say, or is it because they lead us closer to God in their words and in their actions?

But because loyalty can be so powerful, like what we read in Song of Solomon, it can be strong as death, we have to be careful to what we are loyal. No follower of Jesus should be more loyal to a political party than to Christ. No follower of Jesus should be loyal to a person more than to Christ. No follower of Jesus should be loyal to an ideology more than to Christ. No follower of Jesus should be loyal to a country more than to Christ. If loyalty to any of these things lead you in the direction away from Christ, it is not of God and you should run away.

This takes us to the Ruth Scripture. . In WWII they rounded up the Jews in the city of Sophia, the capital of Bulgaria. They headed down to the train station the train had pulled up and at 11pm they were supposed take the Jews down to Auschwitz. In this barbed wire enclosure they were weeping and wailing because they knew their destiny. It was a rainy and foggy night. Out of the rain and out of the fog came Metropolitan Kirill, the leader of the Orthodox Church. He stood 2 meters tall to start with but the orthodox priests wear that miter which gives them an extra foot. Imagine this enormous figure striding out of the darkness and out of the fog with his black robes and his white beard hanging down over his robes with about 400 people of his townspeople marching behind him.

They say that his stride was so great and his gait so long that men had to run to keep up with him. He got to the entrance of the barbed wire enclosure. The men of the parish surrounded the barbed wire enclosure with the Jews enclosed. Metropolitan Kirill got to the entrance and the guards pointed their guns at him, and he said to the SS, step aside, they said you can't go in there Father and he said step aside. And he marched in there among the Jews as the soldiers shouted if you go in there we will not let you out.

He raised his arms and quoted one verse of Scripture and changed the destiny of a nation. What verse? As he stood among the Jewish people, the leader of the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria, raised his hands and yelled, from the Book of Ruth, wither soever thou goest, I will go. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my god. And the Jews cheered, and the Christians on the other side of the barbed wire cheered.

And the uproar was so great that people came running out of their houses and they came running down to the train station and hundreds grew into thousands and the SS troopers got on their train and left and never came back again. Not a single Bulgarian Jew ever died in a Nazi concentration camp because a man was willing to be loyal to those who at some level, were diametrically opposed to him, but he saw how they were about to have their humanity robbed from them, even their very lives.

It is examples like these that make me disappointed in the Russian Orthodox Church. They have an opportunity to speak out strongly against the atrocities that are taking place. But I don't know what it is like to live under Putin, oh wait, I do. We are called to be loyal to the kingdom of God because God has never stopped being loyal to us.

Ruth and Naomi were very, very different. Ruth was a Moabitess who worshiped other gods. Naomi was an Israelite who loved the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I use this Scripture primarily at funerals for someone that either I don't know very well or who maybe didn't have a very clear relationship with Jesus. The words of this foreign woman whose loyalty is shown when her mother-in-law almost demands that she abandons her, are words of belonging. Like Kirill, her loyalty is to someone whose basic fundamental beliefs are very different.

But can't these words also resonate for us as words that come to us from God? Even though we often are unfaithful, and run away from God and try to put distance between us and God, God says, you can't leave me, even if you descend in sheol, I will be there, even if you turn away from me while you are in college and as a young family, I will always bring you back. Or in the words of Paul in Romans 8:38-39: For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That is the loyalty that God has for us. That is what loyalty looks like.

The loyalty that Ruth has is exceptional. She is willing to give up her gods for her new life situation. Now, that may not sound like a big deal, but can you imagine converting to Islam, or Buddhism, or Judaism in order to secure your life situation. It may not seem like a big deal to

us. If we think all religions are alike we will have a hard time understanding the gravity of this promise. We are learning in your young adults class that not all religions are alike. We do not all worship the same god in the different religions. There is only one way to God, and that is through Jesus.

The impressiveness of Ruth's loyalty is something we can't ignore. Ruth makes this choice, it is not a culturally prescribed one. It is a choice not related to marriage, but rather a refugee woman fleeing from unmitigated disaster and potential starvation, makes this choice. This story models loyalty freely offered to another not by coerced custom, culture, or even a biblical command. Loyalty is a choice that we make. Conversely, loyalty is a choice that God has already made for us, a choice upon which we can rely for our lives and for all of eternity.

We have to remember how this story ends. Ruth becomes the great grandmother of King David, and an ancestor of Jesus. God uses her loyalty to pave the way for his kingdom for all of us. This is what loyalty looks like, what Ruth did, what Song of Solomon says, what Jesus did for us on the cross, even while we were yet sinners. Amen.