

“We Will Abide: Covenantal Relationship in Hard Times”

Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

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Ruth 1: 11-18 (New Revised Standard Edition)

But Naomi said, “Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, to your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you because the hand of God has turned against me” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law but Ruth clung to her.

So Naomi said, “See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law.

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
Where you die, I will die
There will I be buried
May God do thus and so to me and more as well
If even death parts me from you!

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

.....

It is a story for the ages, the story about Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. Ruth and her sister-in-law are married to brothers, Naomi’s sons. Both sons are stricken by an illness that kills them both and their father, too. Naomi is left without husband and sons but she still has two daughters-in-law: Ruth and Orpah. Both hail from Moab but Naomi is from Judah. As do many who grieve, she feels a pull toward home and the comfort of family but she does not expect her daughters-in-law to leave their own families for their own families are there in Moab. She encourages them to “turn back” and asks, “why would you go with me?” With tears and a kiss, Orpah takes her leave but Ruth speaks these words:

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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. (NRSV)

Ruth's words to her beloved mother-in-law has become the wedding vow of many a modern couple – especially lesbians; art has been inspired by Ruth's words: movies, books, poetry and song.

Perhaps this story has for so long endured because it seems that when the storm is passing over ... when your two sons and husband have died; when one is suddenly ill or injured; when you feel as though you are living in a nightmare out of which you will not awaken ... this is when the strength of our union, of our covenant with one another is tested & Ruth's devotion shines forth through the generations.

"Have courage my soul and let us journey on."

(Charles Albert Tindley , composer of the anthem, "The Storm is Passing Over")

It is when we are in the midst of the storm that we must remind ourselves that we are not alone. That is a hard reminder to call up when the voices we most often channel are those that inspire the twin afflictions that are isolation and loneliness.

Here's a message I often repeat: come to church. Come to church.

And when for several Sundays in a row you don't come to church, you *will* receive a call or a text or an email because our experience has taught us that when we don't see you, it is likely because you are in the midst of a storm. So we call.

Because we are a communion of all souls – saints and sinners ... robust and fragile ... at peace and pissed off ... centered and wildly off-balance ... in recovery and addicted ... newly infected and in remission ... joyful and sorrowful ... all of these woven fine and in the house this morning right now ...

Because we are a communion of all souls, we covenant to walk together ... for better or worse ... in sickness and in health ... in good times and in bad times. That's what we promise, *covenant*, with each other.

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Where you go I will go. For your people are my people.

How are we bound to each other? Let's reach back to the 19th century to our Universalist ancestor Hosea Ballou.

Ballou wrote the Treatise on Atonement in 1805. Its full title is:

"A Treatise on Atonement. In Which, the Finite Nature of Sin Is Argued, Its Cause and Consequences as Such; The Necessity and Nature of Atonement, and Its Glorious Consequences, in the Final Reconciliation of All Men, to Holiness and Happiness."

Ballou endeavored to prove that sin is finite and that universal holiness and happiness is the great object of the gospel plan. Remember just how contrary is this theology – that sin is finite - to that of the Calvinists of his day who, in short, did not in any way shape or form believe that sin – that the mistakes that every single human makes every single day of our lives – are infinitely marked on our souls from now and through to whatever it is that comes next.

Our theological inheritance is that we are redeemed and forgiven by a loving God ... by the Love that will not let you go ... (Translate as you need.)

But there's more and this "more" is what I want to especially hold up this morning.

Ballou reasons that Universalism throws off what was in early the 19th century the preoccupation with individual salvation. He insists that other people are essential to our own salvation.

Other people are essential to our own salvation.

And this is how and where our covenant to walk with each other comes in.

We none of us can be saved from the corruptive nature of isolation that enforces broken relationship with God, if you will; or if you won't, with our best selves – we will not be saved without the loving, covenantal support of those who have committed, *who have covenanted* to walk with us. We are that interconnected.

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For those who claim this Unitarian Universalist congregation as home, look around and hold this vow in your heart as you do:

*Where you go, I will go
Where you lodge, I will lodge
Your people shall be my people*

These flawed and magnificent people are your people. They will call you in when you have fallen out. They will see your brokenness as opportunity for growth and healing. They will love you through the storm that's passing over.

And ... they will so annoy you. And they will take your breath away for their generosity of spirit and kindness – especially when good times are only in the rearview mirror and bad times are straightaway.

Let's now take a broad look at bad times because last week was a bad week for the American experiment.

“A Republic ... if you can keep it”, said Benjamin Franklin.

Right about now, it feels like we cannot keep it.

Right about here, I'm going to share a piece someone else's “sermon”. Brother Dan Rather addressed his faithful flock:

How do you balance normalcy against the backdrop of what is taking place in Washington? How do you pack your kids' lunches, make Super Bowl plans, check the air on your car's tires when the Senate has rubber stamped the very type of actions our founding fathers feared could threaten our republic?

These are not only questions for our times. In moments of crisis there is always a struggle between life going on and responding to the import of the moment. Do you fight for what is right, organize, mobilize, and pledge an all-out effort at the ballot box? Or do you gather for a neighborhood barbeque, head to the church social, take a walk through the woods with your partner? I believe this cannot be considered a binary option. You do all of these things. Even during World War II, there still was a World Series. Even during Vietnam there were school plays. Even after 9/11 there was time for coffee with a friend.

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Many see today an assault on our democracy, and our humanity. To push back against those forces means not giving up on either front. To be sure fear is a potent tool for autocrats, but so is cynicism. Those who seek to divide us can be held accountable in elections but they can also be defeated through affirmative acts of kindness.

To which we say, "Amen, Brother Rather". We will do both and keep cynicism at bay. We will abide.

We will abide.

We're going back to the deli where I sit with my colleagues and friends the Reverends Elea Kemler and Ellen Spero – wise and funny women both. Ellen is telling Elea and I about a new interfaith, anti-racism effort into which she and the good people she serves in Chelmsford, MA have thrown their energy. Ellen tells us how powerful and inspiring was the project's leader. All acknowledged that the effort is difficult and the goal so big. The question was posed, "How will we do it?" And the powerful and inspiring leader responded, "We will abide."

We will abide.

Through the storm, through the night,
We will abide.

Because other people are essential to our salvation and ours to theirs.
We will abide.

For where you go I will go, Beloveds.
We will abide.

For your people are my people.
We will abide.

As our mistakes are finite so is our brokenness,
We will abide.

In the name of our shared covenant,
We will abide.

We will abide as a resilient and strong community of the faithful. We will abide by a commitment to keep hope kindled, especially now, because

autocrats depend on our hope being beaten down until we are paralyzed by hopelessness.

We will abide by our covenantal mission: to welcome each other and the stranger. To care for each other and our neighbors. To seek justice.

Powered by Love and committed to joy, we will abide.

Amen.

As a benediction, I sang this song to the congregation:

<https://shoshanajedwab.bandcamp.com/track/where-you-go>

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Music by Shoshana Jedwab

Lyrics by Shoshana Jedwab based on the Book of Ruth