

TOGETHER
RUTH 1:1-9, 16-17
NOVEMBER 15, 1987

Page 1

In those days, about 3,000 years ago, it was often disastrous for a wife when her husband died. It is difficult enough now for a woman to become a widow, but it was even more difficult then for there was no social security system. Usually a widow was cared for by her family; sometimes her brother-in-law married her. But Naomi found herself widowed in a foreign land, far from Bethlehem and far from family. During a time of famine in Bethlehem, Naomi, her husband Elimelech, and their two sons moved to Moab, a country on the other side of the Dead Sea. The two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, but then tragedy struck. All three men died, leaving three widows behind, with Naomi responsible for her daughters-in-law. The three women got along together beautifully, and the triple tragedy bonded them even closer together.

But Naomi had economic problems; how were they to live? When Naomi heard the famine in Judah had ended and a good barley harvest was expected, she decided to return to Bethlehem. There was quite a scene when she told her daughters-in-law she was going back home. "We will come with you," they cried. "No," Naomi reasoned, "Go back home and stay with your mothers. Go back to your families and they will care for you in your widowhood." Orpah tearfully took Naomi's advice and went home, but Ruth had grown fond of Naomi and was intensely loyal to her. No way would she desert Naomi and allow her to take that long journey to Bethelhem by herself. They were now family. They were together. They were together, by marriage. They were together, because of death. And they would face this new transition in life together. They would journey into the future, not knowing how they would be received, not knowing if they would find a home in Bethlehem, not knowing if they could even make the arduous journey. Ruth vowed, we will go together. Ruth then said those immortal words: (Ruth 1:16-17)

Don't ask me to leave you! Wherever you go, I will go;
wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live.
Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God.
Wherever you die, I will die, and that is where I will be
buried. May the Lord's worst punishment come upon me if I
let anything but death separate me from you.

But, the modern translations will never convey the meaning as well as the King James version. My age is showing, but I do prefer the King James version of Ruth's immortal words.

Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following
after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where
thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people,
and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and
there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me and more
also, if ought but death part thee and me.

The experience of Ruth and Naomi, immortalized by Ruth's plea, is the prototype of marriage, where each partner is willing to go where the other goes, and live where the other lives, where your people will be my people and my people will be your people. The experience of Ruth and Naomi is also the prototype of the church. Perhaps it was not important in the days when most people lived within the arms of their larger, extended families; but now when many of us are separated from our families, and severed from our childhood

TOGETHER
RUTH 1:1-9, 16-17
NOVEMBER 15, 1987

Page 2

roots, the fellowship of the church is very important. Few people are able to live their lives alone as hermits. People need people, and the church is God's family where we can be together.

This fall in our church we are emphasizing covenants, the covenant God has made with us to be our God, and our covenants with God in response to God's covenant, especially the covenants of prayer, presence, gifts and service. In this week's New Outlook--our church paper--Kent Lewallen wrote a moving personal account of how he has come back to the church in his young adult life, and what attendance, or presence, means in his life.

Kent, in his maturing process, has discovered that the church is not comprised of perfect people, but people seeking to grow. He wrote, "people are attending church not because they are perfect but because they want this to be a better world and want to help make it so." He discovered that "the people of this church were here to grow and learn together. We may sometimes forget the best way to treat each other, but we gather together regularly to learn and relearn how Christ has shown us the way."

God has created us to live our lives together with him and with other people. An example is seen in nature where animals and birds have learned how to survive together, in advance of humans. We humans are behind. I'm thinking particularly of geese, and am indebted for this analogy to Dewane Zimmerman, pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Phoenix. He quoted the cynic who says, "I love Jesus. I love the Gospel. But the church is for the birds." Ah, but consider the birds; the church would be well off to emulate the birds.

Geese have learned to increase their range by 70% by flying together in a v-formation, rather than flying separately. By flying together, they are far more effective. Why? Because the updraft of all the wings together holds them all up. Therefore, they can go further when they fly together. The lead bird expends no more effort or energy than the rest because the lead bird is likewise held up and empowered by the rest. By the way, they take turns being the lead bird. The privilege or danger of being the "martyr" out there in the front is passed around.

It is also safer to fly together. They are protected. Have you noticed kindergarten children tied together while on a field trip, and wondered why that was necessary? The reason teachers tie children together is to keep the cowards from going home! I suppose the real reason is protection, so no child gets lost. We all need protection. We all need to be together so we won't get lost. But we also need the reinforcement we receive from each other so we don't get frightened on life's journey, turn coward, and try to go back to the warm nest.

Geese reinforce each other by honking from behind. I remember as a child watching the geese fly south. It is an impressive sight watching the v-formation and listening to the honks. Those of you who have been active in church leadership know that we get lots of honking from behind: "Why don't you sing the hymns I like?" "We've not done it that way before." "Don't make any changes." "Take the responsibility of leadership, but don't you dare take the authority to make changes without checking with me first."

TOGETHER
RUTH 1:1-9, 16-17
NOVEMBER 15, 1987

Page 3

Have you wondered why geese honk? Those who seem to know tell us the geese are communicating with each other. The honks change tones. They tell each other where to find food. They encourage the lead bird, and warn the lead bird about possible danger ahead. Geese honk from behind to encourage one another, to point out the dangers, and to affirm good decisions. We all need affirmation. We all need people who care and who will share concerns. No church is perfect. Not all of us always get along with each other, but we are flying together. In this church we are privileged to fly with people of other races, nationalities, and recent immigrants. Our fellowship is rich in variety. We are far more effective when we fly together--not each in his/her own direction, but together--and when we honk from behind in a spirit of cooperation and helpfulness.

Geese, unlike too many human enterprises, keep company with the fallen. When one is hurt, they all stop. They gather around the wounded one. They wait until the wing is healed. They do not abandon one another. They delay the journey until there is healing or until it is clear there is no hope for the wounded one, then they regroup and fly on.

Sisters and brothers, we need each other. We need each other when we hurt. We need to be together for support and encouragement. We need to be together on our journey to the kingdom of God. We need to be together as we live our lives. We need to fly in a v-formation. We need to fly, rather than stumble. We need to fly over the rough spots of life, rather than get stuck in the mud. We need to soar in the clean air with the sunlight on our heads, far above the ground, so we can see the best way to go. We need to fly to avoid the dangers. We need to fly together to be protected from enemies and to keep from getting lost. We need to fly, but how do we fly?

Do you know how birds fly? By prayer. Birds soar above the ground, defying the law of gravity, with prayer power. They inhale deeply, they breathe deeply, they receive oxygen. The oxygen cleanses their blood. They continue to inhale, filling all the parts of their bodies. The cleansing oxygen fills all the gaps, all the spaces, all the sacks, and the birds are lifted above the earth. We also inhale oxygen, but we soon must exhale. We expel the carbon dioxide. We can, however, inhale the spirit of God. We, too, can fly on prayer power! We can breathe deeply, inhale oxygen into our every pore, and pray, "Come, Holy Spirit."

Come, Holy Spirit, fill every crevice of our beings. Come, Holy Spirit, cleanse our blood; purify us and make us whole. Come, Holy Spirit, cleanse and remove all those spots of bitterness. Look at the resentments, old angers, and hurt feelings you've got tucked away in some dark corner. There are cobwebs over them. They are beginning to mould and rot. Some of those old hurt feelings are beginning to smell up your personality. Do you carry any grudges? Are there folks you don't speak to or write to anymore? They probably don't even know you're mad at them, or if they do know you're angry with them, they probably don't care! You are only crippling yourself. Come, Holy Spirit, cleanse and fill the spaces, fill the crevices, fill the potholes, not with grudges, resentments and hurt feelings, but with love and joy, so we may fly! We may soar!

TOGETHER
RUTH 1:1-9, 16-17
NOVEMBER 15, 1987

Page 4

TOGETHER
RUTH 1:1-9, 16-17

DOUGLAS NORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

NOVEMBER 15th, 1987

Sisters and brothers, a few weeks ago you were asked to covenant your time, and offer time in service to a community cause or to the church's ministry. Three weeks ago you were asked to covenant your attendance, to be here physically in the worship service so that we might be together. It is difficult to fly together if we don't see one another. This morning, I ask you, will you pray?

Will you covenant to pray for yourself and for our church? Will you take a few minutes each day and pray in your own way. However and wherever you pray, will you increase that time and pray for the rest of us?

Will you pray for our children, youth, and adults? Will you pray for our church leaders? Will you pray for our staff? Will you pray for your ministers? Will you pray that together we may be open to God's spirit, and do God's will here in our church?

Can you imagine the power that will be turned loose when the Holy Spirit is allowed to lighten each of us so that we can fly? Can you imagine the power when we together lift each other up, when we lift our church above sordidness, above indifference, above problems and shortcomings, above negative honking into the glorious, bright, clean air of God's will and purpose?

Sisters and brothers, will you pray? Will you pray for one another? Let's fly together. Together--isn't "together" a beautiful word! "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."