

“Loyalty”

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
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About a month ago, on January 11th, a 100 year old woman died. Her name was Miep Gies.

Some of you may know her story. Miep was an office secretary in the office of a man named Otto Frank, who ran a spice business. In July of 1942, Otto asked her to help his family by bringing them food and supplies, while they hid from the Nazis in an annex behind his warehouse.

“I answered, ‘Yes, of course’”, she said later. “It seemed perfectly natural to me. I could help these people.” And she did.

For two years, she took great risks by biking around to different grocers, using extra food ration cards to get the family food. She helped keep them alive. Sadly, after more than 2 years, the Nazis found the annex, arrested and deported its inhabitants. Of the 8 people she helped hide, only one- Otto Frank- survived.

When Otto returned, Miep gave him all the papers she had collected for safekeeping- and in 1947, Otto published them: his daughter Anne Frank’s diary.

That diary was the first book published about the Holocaust. It was translated into 65 languages and read by millions. It is why we know Miep Gies remarkable story.

Part of what touches me about her story is that the promise she kept for 26 months- despite the threat to her own life- was not a vow to a spouse, children or parents, not a vow to her own kith and kin, but a promise to her boss, Otto Frank, and his family. In keeping it, she saved his life, and in some way allowed his brave and talented daughter Anne to live on in the hearts and minds of millions.

But not all of her countrywomen and men had Miep Gies’ same sensibility— otherwise more Jewish people would have survived.

Keeping promises- through good times and bad- might be called loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness. One can be loyal to a person, a community, to oneself, to an idea, to an understanding of the divine or to the best in humankind. It is a value that can literally save lives— physically, emotionally, spiritually. And yet, loyalty, fidelity or faithfulness are not universally held or practiced values.

We have our reasons. For some of us, the very word “loyalty” conjures up the specter of “blind loyalty”, which can be quite dangerous for Life itself. Blind loyalty among government officials can be dangerous for an entire nation. Blind loyalty among religious followers can be misleading, even fatal, to them. Blind loyalty in a dysfunctional relationship can prolong something that should be ended. As those involved in the prevention of domestic violence know, sometimes such relationships even end in violence or death.

For some of us, loyalty may seem not so much dangerous as simply old-fashioned, ill-adapted to our modern society. After all, we live in a fluid- some might say transient- society, one where many businesses no longer have loyalty to their workers, where people move on average every six years, where many change their career multiple times in their lives, where the divorce rate is about 50%, where few look askance at us if we switch political parties or religions.

There is a story about a guy who is stranded on a deserted island for years. Finally, a boat comes by, and the stranded guy gives the boat captain a tour of the island, where there are three buildings. “What’s this?” asks the Captain, and the man says, “Oh, that’s my house.” “And this?” “That’s my church,” says the man. “And what about this building?” “Oh that,” says the man, “That’s the church I *used* to go to.”

Sometimes a change is a really good sign that we are thinking for ourselves! Sometimes, it may simply indicate that we’re not really thinking.

In some ways, we Unitarian Universalist congregations benefit from this fluidity in modern identity, since so many of our members come from different or non-religious backgrounds. In other ways we suffer, as when our UU young adults drift away, join another faith with their spouse, or stop belonging to a congregation. As one of those who has remained loyal to my childhood faith, I mourn such losses and wonder how to stem them.

Does loyalty have anything to do with it? I don't know. What do you think we teach our young people about loyalty? To whom or what are you loyal? An idea? A person? This community? When do you find loyalty admirable, and when problematic?

To help us reflect on such questions, I thought we might turn to some of the oldest and most famous words about loyalty I'm aware of—the words of Ruth the Moabite, as recorded in the Hebrew Bible. They are the words you've heard already this morning “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.”

They are words so poetic, I've been asked to use them as a reading at weddings, even though their origin is not at all about a marriage. Rather, they are words from a woman to her mother-in-law. (Perhaps the grooms who request this reading should consider that!)

The story behind these words comes from the book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible, a *very* old story- so old scholars don't even *know* how old it is. It was written down *somewhere* between the 10th to 4th centuries BCE. . It is a short story with two main characters: Naomi, an Israelite woman, and her daughter-in-law, Ruth, a Moabite woman, who become widows in the country of Moab. Childless and widowed, they are left without any male to offer them financial security in a culture where women's *only* security came through marriage to a man or through her sons. The older woman, Naomi, decides to return to home town of Bethlehem, and instructs her daughters-in-law to find new husbands in Moab-- very logical and reasonable advice.

One of the daughters-in-law mourns the loss of her relationship with Ruth, but then does what makes sense— she stays in Moab to find a new husband. The other, Ruth, makes what could be seen as a foolish, even dangerous, decision. She declares her loyalty to her *mother-in-law*, a woman, not a man, a woman not of her own blood kin, nation or religion. In so doing, she seems to jeopardize any future security for herself, a security she could have easily found by staying, and marrying, in Moab.

Some of the reasons I like this story are that it is one of the few stories with female main characters, it is full of dialogue (more-so than any other book in the Hebrew Bible), and it reveals the dilemmas that women faced under the patriarchal society. Naomi's conversation with

her daughters-in-law- where she suggests their loyalty to her is misguided since she is too old to provide them with any more husbands— reveals just how ridiculous the women’s situation is.

Not only that, but the story clearly reveals just how smart the women are given their restrictive context. The rest of the story tells how the two women manage, through very clever strategy, to get Ruth married off again— this time to Boaz, a wealthy, kind relative of Naomi and an Israelite, who is impressed by Ruth’s loyalty to her mother-in-law.

Eventually, the women of Israel proclaim that Ruth’s worth is greater than that of *seven* sons. That is quite a statement in a patriarchal society! Yet it’s not surprising the woman think this way. With Ruth’s marriage to Boaz, *both* women acquire a protector and security. Not only that, but Ruth and Boaz have a son, who becomes the grandfather of Israel’s greatest king, King David. In the Christian scriptures, this genealogical line is then extended to- guess who?-Jesus.

So what’s so remarkable about that? What’s so remarkable about King David- or Jesus- having a Moabite great-grandmother? Well, in those days, marriage *within* one’s ethnic, cultural and religious community was seen as necessary for the survival of community identity and family property. Several books in the Hebrew Bible state that for the Israelites, intermarriage is simply *wrong*. The laws in Deuteronomy *specifically* prohibit intermarriage with Moabites- who were frequent enemies of Israel.

So this story offers an explanation of the possibly *embarrassing* fact that King David’s great-grandmother was a poor, widowed Moabite. She was a poor, widowed Moabite, yes, but she was *also* loyal-- an ideal daughter-in-law, wife and Gentile. She was loyal, and her loyalty not only saved her mother-in-law’s life, but saved her own future and the future of the Davidic line.

Ruth’s story seems to say that the God of Israel’s works through unexpected people-- not just God’s chosen people, but the people of *every* nation, not just kings and prophets, but poor, single, foreign women. It is also a reminder that loyalty is not something reserved for marriage, but a gift we can find in *all sorts* of relationships, under *all sorts* of surprising conditions, from *all sorts* of unexpected people and places.

Where do you see loyalty in your life? Has it ever, in some real sense, saved you? How- and from whom- have you learned about it?

Perhaps it took an illness to re-learn the value of loyalty, as it did with June Jordan, author of our second reading today. Perhaps like June, it was loyal friends who came to your rescue in times of trouble, and helped save you.

Some may have learned from a spouse or marriage partner who has been with them through thick and thin. Some may have learned the hard way— by being a loyal caretaker for a parent or a struggling child. Others may have learned a lot about loyalty from a four-footed companion, from a pet. There's the wonderful saying, "Help me to be the kind of person my dog thinks I am."

Private loyalty, like private morality, can also have a social dimension. Loyalty can also inform our belonging in communities. I know you are loyal to *this* community—otherwise you wouldn't be sitting here today, on Super Bowl Sunday while your minister is away! Perhaps some of you have learned loyalty from a small group or others in this congregation. Certainly, loyalty is one of those intangible rewards of joining a UU community.

Still others among us may have learned about loyalty through groups outside the church, or groups like AlAnon, AA or NA. Indeed, AA and AlAnon may be one of the primary teachers of loyalty in our modern society. Whenever I contact someone in my congregation with a question about AlAnon or AA, inevitably that person offers to be a resource to others. Those who've had a partner help them through sobriety or AlAnon seem to deeply understand the value of loyalty, even from strangers. Sometimes a stranger has saved their life.

This is a true blessing, since alcoholism and drug abuse affect so many. In fact, I suspect that if we were to raise our hands if someone in our own family- grandparent, parent, child, self, niece, nephew- has been affected by drug or alcohol addiction, we would see a sea of hands. I know I would raise mine, and when I asked my congregation most people raised theirs. Perhaps some of you would too. Let's do that—if you're comfortable doing so, I invite you to raise your hand if someone in your family has been impacted by addiction to alcohol or drugs.

In our society, there are a lot of people suffering. And perhaps a silver lining is that AA and AlAnon are places where those who struggle can find the kind of loyalty that Ruth once offered—"Do no press me to leave you, or to turn back from following you." In other words, I'm sticking with you. Come hell or high water, I *won't* leave you alone in this. Come hell or high water, *you will not be left alone.*

It is a sentiment, and a reality, that can save a life. Ruth certainly saved Naomi's life. June Jordan spoke of her friends saving her life when she had cancer. Those in AA or AlAnon speak of those groups saving their lives. Meip Gies saved a life, tried to save 7 more, and in some sense, saved for us the spirit-- if not the body-- of a remarkable little girl.

Ever since *The Diary of Anne Frank* was published, Miep worked for tolerance. For 63 years, she worked for tolerance, until she died. But when I read her obituary, I was most struck by two things. First, it said that when she found Anne's papers after the raid, she had refused to read them, saying that even a teenager's privacy was sacred. She later said that if she had, she would have had to burn them, since they incriminated all the helpers.

The second thing that impressed me from her obituary was the fact that Miep resisted being lauded for what she did. She resisted being called a hero. In 1997, when she was 87 years old, she explained this while engaged in an online chat with schoolchildren. She said, "I don't want to be considered a hero. Imagine young people would grow up with the feeling that you have to be a hero *to do your human duty*. I am afraid nobody would ever help other people, because *who is a hero?* I was not. I was just an ordinary housewife and secretary."

To stay true to one's friends, acquaintances, commitments through both good times and bad might be called faithfulness, fidelity, loyalty. Some might call it "just helping out" or "my human duty". Some might see it as a blessing in their lives, and recall with new understanding those ancient and poetic words of an ordinary woman named Ruth.

Like her, may we learn and live the value of loyalty, and teach it to our children, and our children's children, too.

Amen.

Our first reading is from the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible, Chapter 1, verses 6 through 19.

This reading tells part of the story of Naomi and her two daughters-in-law.

Naomi was an Israelite woman, who had moved from Bethlehem in Judah to the country of Moab due to a famine. Her two sons married in Moab, so her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, were Moabite women. Unfortunately, all three women lose their husbands to death, and with their husbands, their financial security. After the deaths, Naomi decides to return home to Israel, to Bethlehem, having heard food was available there once more.

“Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah.

But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back each of you to your mother’s house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.” Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, “No, we will return with you to your people.”

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, go 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 the Lord has turned against me.” Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

So she 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 the Lord 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. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem.”

2nd Reading: from an essay called “Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan”, by June Jordan, a poet, author and professor of African American studies at the University of California.

“Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you”. From earliest childhood, I remember one or another version of these passionate words. As far as I knew, they were the only memorable, and even startling, thoughts attributed to any woman in the Bible. And, as a little girl, I appropriated the fierce loyalty, and the all-out loving commitment embodied by this passage, as an ideal towards which I could and should eagerly aspire. But the story around those unparalleled declarations remained rather wan, and confused, and confusing, in my mind, until this past summer...

This summer I became one of the too many thousands of women who must fight breast cancer. From the surgery to determine whether or not there was a malignancy through the surgery for removal of the malignant tissue and removal of lymph nodes... I suddenly became wholly dependent upon the kindnesses of my friends. I had to depend on my friends for my personal care, for the walking of my dog, for the securing of groceries, for the cooking and serving of food, for the cleaning up of the kitchen and of the house, for transportation to and from the doctors, for the handling of correspondence and for diplomatic dealing with innumerable phone calls... for my life. How could I possibly have survived any of the ordeal of this fight, and how could I possibly hope to heal and defeat this cancer, without the unstinting love given to me?

...when I could read again, I looked up the story of Ruth to see if I could make better sense of it now. And I could. I did.”