

## “Commitment”

Ruth 1:15-18

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After my dad’s brain surgery early in 1994, I happened to be in his hospital room when the psychologist came to evaluate his mental well being. There was a list a mile long of every kind of question you can imagine. I was impressed with the breadth of my dad’s knowledge. There was only one question that stumped him. He looked over to me, and I didn’t know the answer either! The question was: Who wrote Faust? I returned the next day with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Everyday after that, I re-posed the same question, “Who wrote Faust?” and everyday he smiled a knowing smile. Goethe had become an unlikely agent of a father-son bonding in the father’s last days.

I still haven’t read Faust, but I do treasure the following quote from Goethe: “Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness....the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred.”

**Making a commitment is where the abundance of life begins.**

Ruth made this precious discovery when she committed herself to a relationship with her mother-in-law, Naomi. “Where you go, I will go. Your God will be my God. Where you die, I will die.” I doubt that anywhere in literature there exists such moving words of commitment.

For Ruth, it opened up a whole new life. She found a supportive community. She fell in love with and married a farmer named Boaz. She raised a family. She overcame prejudice. She gained the respect of her neighbors. This all began for Ruth when she made a commitment. Then Providence moved with her.

My understanding of Christian discipleship is that it begins with a commitment. Peter said, YES, and left his nets. Priscilla said, YES, and gathered the women for prayer. If you have been at South Church for even a few years, you know that a favorite hymn of mine is the one from the Church of India, "I Have Decided." The refrain has taken up permanent residence in my bones: "I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus; I have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back."

To make this commitment to Christian discipleship is to begin a journey for which there are no road maps, no appointed resting places, no pre-ordained paths to follow. To commit oneself to the way of discipleship is a risk. It may well be the greatest risk one ever takes, riskier even than the stock market. It may take you out of your comfort zone. It may place you at odds with your brother or your sister. It may take you to an inner city soup kitchen or to a memory care center or to a prison or to a church school classroom.

However, one thing is for certain, once the commitment has been made, then Providence moves with you. Von Goethe was right about that! Once I had made my decision to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and to enter seminary, we landed at the campus of Andover Newton Theological School without any money. But Providence moved with us. The field placement supervisor, Dr. Walter Telfer, found me a position as a youth minister in a church on Moody Street in Waltham, a church with two parsonages! So we moved in and enjoyed free rent for two years!

When we landed in South Dakota on an Indian reservation, where the salary wasn't enough to buy groceries, our refrigerator mysteriously filled up with beef and pork and buffalo and grouse and venison and perch and eggs. I tell you: Providence moves in mysterious ways once a commitment has been made.

There's no telling how Providence will open doors and make resources available. When one of our sons severed a finger tip in a well pump accident, we rushed him down highway 212 to the public health hospital, and there in Eagle Butte, a town some would consider the end of the earth, was an emergency room doctor from New York City, on loan to the Sioux tribe for two weeks. He sewed that finger tip back on as easily as a grandmother darning a hole in a wool sock. I could go on and on with my examples. My simple believe is that once a commitment is made to follow the way of Love, then Providence moves with you. That is; all the forces of God's Creation align in ways one could never have imagined or even hoped for. It doesn't mean that life will always be without pain. It does mean that life will always be sustained by God's love.

When I read through the names of the South Church saints, those we are honoring today, I recognize so many who, like Ruth, or like James and Martha and Mary, made a commitment, and never turned back. Providence moved with these South Church woman and men of faith. There was abundance in their lives. Their lives were not spared pain; but their lives were sustained by love. And they blessed all our lives.

The invitation born on the plains of Moab and renewed on the banks of the Jordan River, and renewed again and again every time someone says YES to the Christian faith; then Providence kicks in and doors fly open and life is sustained by grace. This is what I have come to believe. It's my faith statement. As always, I share my faith with you in the greatest of hope. Amen!

