

“Strange Commitments”  
November 5, 2006

Ruth 1:1-18  
Mark 12:28-34

A month ago, I talked about lawyers and one lawyer in particular in a sermon, and I wasn't very complimentary. When we got home that Sunday afternoon, Chey told me that she thought I'd gotten a little too close to lawyer-bashing in the sermon. She suggested that I might want to pay attention to my attitude toward my former colleagues and former profession. At the time, I probably responded to her with a “hmm” or something equally noncommittal, but I did take what she said seriously.

Even though I didn't say I agreed with her at the time, I've come to think that Chey was right. If I had had any doubts about that before this last week, the doubts are all gone. Those doubts are gone because I was going to start this sermon with another lawyer story. I was going to hold up what an attorney said to me a couple of months ago as an example of how some people misunderstand what church is all about. I was going to use him and his words as a debating opponent to could defeat with my sermon.

But the more I wrestled both with what that lawyer had said and with this morning's scripture readings, the more I came to see that he had offered me an important challenge, not just a handy jumping off point for this morning's sermon.

So here's my lawyer story for today. I was having coffee with a ministerial colleague one morning in September, and a man whom the other minister knew walked up to us. My companion introduced us, one to the other: new minister in town, meet long-time Sonoma lawyer. After a pleasantries or two, the lawyer looked at me and asked, with what really did seem close to a sneer, “So what are you and your church selling?”

I confess: I found the question more than a little irritating. But I tried to let my irritation just pass on by before I answered him. I don't remember my exact words, but I know I disputed the notion that we were “selling” anything and then described some of what I think this church gives to its members and to the world. The conversation moved on to other things, and, after a while, the lawyer went on his way.

As I've said, over this last week, I've realized that his question gives us something important to wrestle with, but, still, I'm uneasy with his assumption that this church is a community of people that is “selling” something. I'm uneasy, because one of the most important callings of the church in contemporary America is to witness against a culture that tries to reduce every aspect of life to a commodity to be bought and sold. We are called to witness against the economic and social forces that seek to turn everything – from sex to drinking water to childhood – into sources of profit to be exploited, instead of gifts of God's grace to be cherished. So it's vitally important to remember that this church is not in the business of “selling” anything in that sense.

We're also not in the business of “selling” anything in the sense that you have to pay a price to come through either of those two doors. We do not charge admission, either in the form of dollars and cents, or in the form of a particular identity or belief you have to have before you're welcome here. Whether you are rich or poor, male or female, gay or straight, joyful or despairing, you're welcome here. No admission fee, no ideological test. No one has to buy his or her way into this community.

But even though we're not in the business of selling anything, we *are* in the business of *offering* something here. So in my own mind, I turned the lawyer's question into, "What are you and the church *offering*?" And as I spent time with that question, one answer got stronger and stronger. When we boil it down, what we offer here is a life that has at its center some very strange commitments. What we are offering, what we are "selling," is the joy and challenge of living in a glorious web of strange commitments.

Now maybe your commitments to this church and to one another have become so familiar and so much a part of your life that they no longer seem strange. If that's true for you, I ask you to bear with me and be willing to take another look.

I'll start with one of my strongest experiences of the strangeness of what we do here and of the promises we make. As many of you know, Chey and I were here last January, and you and I had all of 4 days to get to know one another. After that whirlwind of activity – what I call the meet, greet, and preach – this congregation voted to call me as its next minister, and, in wonder and joy, I accepted that call. Chey and I then returned to Massachusetts to bring the New England chapter of our life to a close and to prepare for our move west.

At the same time, by phone and by e-mail, Lori Hutchinson and I were working on the specifics of the Letter of Call, the agreement between you and me as congregation and minister. As I worked on the Letter of Call and read the promises we would be making to one another, the weirdness, the strangeness of those commitments hit me full force. There I was, back in Massachusetts, in a community of friends and loved ones I'd known for 10 years ... and I was promising to come *here* and to love and lead and serve *this* community – a community I had barely begun to know. And you, through the Church Council and the Search Committee, were making some big commitments to love and support and listen to me, someone you hardly knew. Strange, risky, kinda wild, if you ask me. But we went ahead made those commitments anyway, and in the last 6 months we've been living into them in our worship, our laughter, our tears, and our openness to one another.

But these latest commitments in the life of this church are just the tip of the congregational iceberg. I hope it's not news that you've been doing this unusual commitment thing for a long, long time. This congregation would not be the glorious and fascinating mix of God's people that it is if you hadn't been making and keeping those commitments and if the church's foremothers and fathers hadn't kept them in the past. We wouldn't be here if all those people, past and present, hadn't kept their promises to love, support, challenge, and cherish one another, if they hadn't kept their promises to seek to love and serve God in and through this church. We wouldn't be here, if they and you had not honored the commitment to walk with one another on a path into an unknown future, to trust one another on that path, and to forgive one another's violations of that trust.

This morning's readings from the Book of Ruth and the Gospel of Mark remind us that this church is part of a long tradition of making strange commitments. The readings remind us that countercultural commitments have been at the heart of Jewish and Christian traditions for a very long time.

In Ruth, we encounter an ancient story of a commitment that flew in the face of societal expectations and patriarchal assumptions. In a time and place where a woman's value rested solely on her relationship with a man – her father, husband, son, brother, or

cousin – a woman named Ruth refused to leave the side of her mother-in-law after her own husband’s death. She chose to make a strange commitment, to stay with her mother-in-law Naomi, to care for, love, and protect her. Then, and this is even more amazing to me, the thoroughly patriarchal religious community of ancient Israel memorialized her story and her strange commitment as sacred scripture.

In the reading from Mark, we hear Jesus teaching his followers that the most important commandments of all are two simple calls: to love God unreservedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves. On the surface, these may not seem like strange commitments. But when we remember Jesus’ teachings about neighbors, when we remember that his words and ministry demonstrated that a neighbor is *anyone* who needs our help, even if that person is a despised foreigner, an outcast, or even an enemy, we realize that he was asking his disciples to do something challenging and strange ... and he’s asking us to do the same.

In a world in which so many people, nations, leaders, and demagogues continue to believe that might makes right and violence and war will bring peace, we have been called together, to offer – to sell – a fundamentally different understanding of human life and human worth. We have been called together -- to walk in the pathways of love and to follow the one who taught and lived the truths that the greatest among us are those who serve and that we can receive abundant life only if we are willing to offer our lives in service.

So those are the strange commitments *I* think we’re selling. But this is Stewardship Sunday, and perhaps the question now needs to be what are we *buying* this morning? What are we – you and I – hoping for, longing for? What vision and what possibilities are we hoping to transform into reality, as we make yet another strange commitment, by pledging our financial support to this church?

What *I’m* buying, what I’m dreaming of, is a chance for this church to *be* God’s love, in a world that is often cold and loveless.

I’m buying a chance for this church to bring healing into a world that seems filled with diseases of the soul, the body, and the body politic.

I’m buying a chance for this church to continue to be a spiritual home for people who have been wounded and rejected by other churches claiming to speak for God.

I’m buying a chance for this church to cherish and teach the children in our midst and to bring more children into this loving community.

I’m buying a chance for this church to grow deeper in the life of the Spirit and to grow outward in its service in the community.

What are *you* willing to buy this morning? What hopes and dreams for this church are you willing to support generously with your time, your talents, *and your money*?

With everything I have, with everything I am, I urge not to think that what you’re buying is another 12 months of gas, water, and electricity; another 12 months of a roof over our heads, another 12 months of maintenance. I urge you not to think that you’re buying 12 more months of my time, my love, and my care.

Instead, I urge you to realize that what you and I can “buy” this morning is a dream for this church, this community, and this world. A dream that the Holy Spirit is working to transform into reality. We are buying a future for this church that makes it

possible for us to share -- beyond these walls -- the love, fellowship, hope, healing, and reconciliation that are at the heart of this congregation.

My beloved friends, stewardship and our financial support for this church are not about giving grudgingly or out of guilt. Stewardship is about the joy of joining with each other and with the Holy Spirit. It is about creating a world in which everyone experiences the blessedness of life and everyone cherishes the blessedness of all creation. May God bless our hopes, our dreams, and our giving. Amen.

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