

Covenant and Marriage

Rev. Chandler Stokes

On Ruth 1:1-18



Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Introduction to the Scripture Reading: A few preliminaries...

The sermon focuses on marriage today. In that focus I don't want to lose track of the fact that being part of a couple is not the only form of human relationship that God blesses. There are many people who are single—and blessed in their singleness. To be single is neither inferior nor superior to being coupled. To be one or the other is a particular calling, one among others. In the same way it is a calling to bear children or raise children or adopt them or to watch someone else do all that. Though the focus is on couples I trust the universal aspects will be evident. I am also not addressing the challenges of divorce today—another critical subject, but for another time.

Further, in 2008 our session approved the ordination task force report called "A Visible Sign of the New Humanity." Among the report's significant graces is that it makes clear that we do not expect everyone to make one conclusion in their understanding sexual orientation. If you haven't read the report before, I commend it to you. I'll have some copies with me after worship today.

Sexual orientation is a subject I touch on somewhat regularly, though not always directly or in depth. In today's sermon I do not make a case here that sexual orientation is a gift from God; but I assume that for today's sermon. Our sexuality is a gift, and it is not given in the same way to everyone. That is not the focus of today's sermon. The question instead today is "What Relationships Should the Church Bless?"

My mother taught me never to talk about religion, politics, money or sex in polite company. I could never figure how I could preach on religion unless she didn't consider church "polite company"—and evidently she didn't like stewardship sermons either. But nothing is hidden from God, and it's not healthy to conceal parts of our lives from God.

Nevertheless, one of my wise and witty professors once said, "No matter how gracefully you approach certain sermon topics, these topics will raise the tension level in the sanctuary. She said, "It's like there are hand grenades rolling around under the pews. Everybody's a little on edge." (...and they go off if anybody laughs...)

I hope you can relax and in addition to the sermon this morning, for those of you who are interested in further conversation, I'm going to be in the parlor for some "sermon response time," before we go off to Helen's carillon concert. So, if you have time, please come and join us.

We begin this conversation with Ruth—a profound story of covenant and commitment.

Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.

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Ruth 1:1-18

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ 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. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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, ¹³ 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." ¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁵ So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ 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.*

¹⁷ 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!"

¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

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Sermon:

Let us pray. *May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

What relationships should the church bless?

To bless a relationship is to say, “We love you and support you.” To bless is to say, “Yes, it is good that you are together. Your relationship is about things we believe in too. We will help you be together.” That’s what it is to bless a relationship.

And on November 24, 1979, the church blessed my relationship with Karen. That day we spoke our promises to one another in front of about four congregations we had served at that point and five officiating ministers—clearly clergy overkill. One of the critical and enduring gifts of that day was that the church blessed us. A community pulled together for a day from all parts of our lives and representing also the community that would surround us in the future, even as we would go here and go there, lodge here and lodge there—that community blessed us. The people explicitly vowed their blessing. They were asked, “Friends and family, do you come here willingly and joyfully, showing by your presence here your support of Karen and Chandler’s decision to marry, and do you acknowledge the fact that today they are forming a new family, a status which is to be held in honor by all people, and do you promise to continue to support them in their new roles as husband and wife? If so, say, ‘We do.’” And they all said, “We do!”

They blessed our relationship; they promised to honor and support our relationship. And we have continued to enjoy the honor and support of the communities in which we have lived and worked, in the church and outside it. I have learned to expect that people will support us, right until the end, until Karen is gone, or I am gone, and one of us is then supported in our loss.

That community blessing is what I want to talk about, because I suspect that no enduring relationship is ever the work and commitment of just two people. We are empowered to keep a primary relationship strong by means of a whole system of relationships—layers and overlaps of intimacy and trust and support of family and friends and children and the blessing of those other people. Single people seem to know better the necessity of this network of blessing than couples often do.

Karen has told this story a number of times—it is about how a community, how a church blesses. People ask her, “So, why Westminster? Why West Michigan and so far away? What were the indications that this was a call?” We visited more than one church that summer; there were other interviews at other churches. At one of them—at one of those gatherings where you meet the committee, where you’re feeling each other out, trying to discern the call—Karen asked them, “You know that I won’t be coming right away, that it could be a couple of years before my call in Oakland concludes. So, how do you feel about your pastor coming without his partner?” Their response was, “Yes, we’re aware of that. We were wondering how you were going to make that work.” And then she shared our thoughts.

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When we were interviewing here, when I was in a meeting with the Presbytery, Karen was outside with the search committee. She took the opportunity to ask the PNC, “You know that I won’t be coming right away, that it might be a couple years; so how do you feel about your pastor coming without his partner?” They said, “Yes, we’re aware of that. How can we help you make that work?” How can we ... help you ... make that work?

There’s a vital difference. When you hear that, you begin to think that you’re in a healthy, mutual relationship with people. Wow. And you have helped us make it work—that is how you bless a relationship. Without your blessing us these last twenty months, there is no way to be sure that Karen would soon be lodging here... but she will (for keeps!). God willing now, she will be here the next time we’re in worship together, either up at Camp Henry at Family Camp or here at the end of August.

You have fulfilled and continue to fulfill the vows that those people spoke back in 1979. Thank you. Thank you for your love and for your support of our relationship—thank you for your blessing.

That kind of blessing might very well be enough to hold a relationship together, but there are additional blessings that we have been given that sometimes go unnoticed. Karen and I have been given the privilege of demonstrating and celebrating our relationship wherever we go. I can go into any church in America, any place in the world, and talk about the person I love and to whom I am committed. I can hold her hand, talk about her publicly, introduce her as my partner. I can ask for prayers and I expect people to understand. We are free in church and in society to celebrate our common life and receive the community’s blessing—the sort of blessing without which, as I’ve said, our struggle to love, comfort, honor and keep would be exceedingly more difficult.

And, as you surely know, not everyone in a loving respectful relationship has this privilege.

Joe’s life-long love is dying. For 30 years they have laughed and cried together. Wiping each other’s brow, tenderly caring through sickness and health, keeping true for better or for worse, faithfully witnessing to hope and love—“where you go, I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge.” And after years of suffering through the ravages of age and disease, Joe holds his love until the last breath and weeps.

And over the next few days, despite a 30-year absence, the family swoops in, takes the house, the car, takes charge of the funeral, and cuts Joe out entirely. Because Joe’s partner was a man, James. Their commitment and fidelity are not honored, and the family’s actions are all perfectly legal.

That is the case in much of America, and much of the wider church supports this state of affairs—affirms that the only relationships the church should bless are those between a man and a woman.

What relationships ought the church to bless? That is my concern today.

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I think in the church in general and in the culture at large we are tragically unclear about marriage and covenant. The views of many Americans suggest that there is something more essentially right, moral, and good in any heterosexual marriage than there is in the relationship that I described between Joe and James.

Now, I don't imagine very many people think that "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?" is a good model for marriage. This is the show with fifty women in bathing suits parading in front of a fully-clothed rich man, vying to become his wife.

As horrible as it is, still, many people will assert that the heterosexuality of the marriage is one good feature to it. And I just want to say, "No it isn't." It's being heterosexual does not redeem it in any way. "Who Wants to Marry a Gay Millionaire?" would be equally offensive. The sexuality of it doesn't represent any moral standing. Reserving marriage for heterosexuals implies that heterosexuality is a virtue, that it is an essential virtue to the relationships the church should bless.

Listen to what a woman wrote recently: "What is less natural than a show about buying and selling spouses? What is more spiritually and morally corrupt than broadcasting a marriage between strangers based upon consumerism and beauty? Sometimes I just don't understand a culture where gay men and women, who have lived together, loved together, committed themselves wholly to one another, cannot marry—and yet marriage as a heterosexual monopoly is fodder for such 'junk' as 'Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?'"

"I am happily married to a fabulous, caring guy. We read in bed together. I crawl into his arms at night and sigh because I am home. This feeling between my husband and me is not because I am a woman and he a man—it is because we are human beings who have created real intimacy, something not reserved only for men and women."¹

The mistake is that we have made heterosexuality into a virtue. I confess that this is where I sometimes get angry. Somehow, the thinking goes, I am virtuous because it is a woman I love. When people tell me, or assume, that my relationship with Karen has at least one kind of essential rightness about it because it is heterosexual, it cheapens my relationship with her. Our marriage has something moral to it because she's a woman and I'm a man? Our marriage is 30 years of working at planting the garden, 30 years of failing to do the dishes or of sometimes cleaning the house on Fridays, and sometimes not, 30 years of working at our separate churches together. It's 30 years of staying up late nights together worrying over the boys, 30 years of laughing at the dogs together, singing together, being in silence together, watching movies together, fighting over hard choices together, 30 years of crying together over her brothers: over Bill's death, and David's Parkinson's and Charlie's cancer, 30 years of touching hands at the beauty of Mahler's Fifth, and none of that precious love is tied to our sexuality. But you're going to define our marriage on that basis?

¹ Jennifer Gray, cited in Adair Lara column in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 24, 2000.

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If I love one person I am virtuous; if I love a different person, I'm not?! It is not who we love, but how we love that always matters to God.

I think the traditional wedding ceremony has this right. The essentials of that ceremony are these vows: "I promise before God and these witnesses to be yours, loving and faithful; for better or for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish; as long as we both shall live." All those things, all of them, are equally possible for gay and straight people.

You know that gay marriage is often portrayed as a threat to the institution of marriage. I think I have come to understand why. I submit it is not a threat to healthy, mature marriages. But I believe it can be experienced as a threat—to an unreflective, default mode of sexually stereotyped roles in marriage. If the traditional gender roles in marriage are offered not as the only model but as one among others, then there are decisions to make, work to do, things to think about and to negotiate. If traditional marriage is the only model, then I might still be able to find a partner who will stay in her place—for instance.

It's perfectly all right to stay in those traditional roles, but it should be a choice that both partners make about their roles.

That's a gift that gay couples have taught me. Many times the roles of gay partners are truly up for formation. Do you pick up after the kids or do I? Do I change the oil or do you? Are you the breadwinner or am I? Or are we both? Or neither? which is usually a problem! So, then it becomes clearly a matter of choice and negotiation—and I have not experienced that as a bad thing. It's not easy—heavens! But it's good, more human.

I wonder how Karen's life might have been different, if I hadn't so often just slipped into the traditional role of the absent, workaholic husband—an easy male model for me to fall into. She also wonders what her life might have been like!

I would much rather aspire to the profound love between two men or two women who covenant and keep mutual respect, kindness, patience, and forbearance for 30 years than any aspect of the hetero-sexual stupidity represented on TV.

To have a committed relationship that resists simply falling into gender stereotypes, that gives each partner the freedom to explore their lives and gifts fully is sometimes a high-wire act. It's a challenge that Karen and I have certainly not always met, but the ideal of the mutuality in that love is deeply rooted in Biblical values that we cherish—Biblical values.

Now the propositions and laws that have emerged here and there to deny the validity or legality of same-sex marriage are invariably couched as the preservation of "Biblical values" or "Biblical marriage." This public call for "Biblical marriage" is another sad reminder that the Bible is the most highly revered, regularly invoked, and least read book in America. If people actually read what it says about marriage, I don't think they would like a lot of it. It's not that the "traditional view of marriage" is Biblical and ours is not. Karen and I, like you, want our marriage to be fully rooted in Biblical values. But there isn't just one view in the Bible, and very few of them are palatable or appropriate as models for our marriage.

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I think I can actually speak for Karen on this one.

The Biblical views of marriage: Let us start with Abraham, who passes off his wife, Sarah, as his sister. I definitely don't have to ask Karen about that one. Abraham and I both have two sons. He fathers Isaac by his wife; and Ishmael by his slave. Another one I don't have to ask her about. There is wide acceptance of polygamy in the Bible and the widespread practice of having concubines. And I don't have to ask if I should emulate Solomon, the wise, who had 700 wives and... 300 concubines.

But setting aside polygamy and concubines, we still have the Biblical practice of Levirate marriage: the Biblical law. When a man dies, leaving a childless widow behind, by law she is to marry her husband's next brother, so that his dead brother would have offspring through him, and his property be properly passed on to his sons. That means my charming brother would add on Karen as a second wife. I know she likes my brother, Gerry, but...

Most Biblical marriages were arranged for the sake of political or economic alliances, and all were related to the importance of property and progeny. A man needed to have children, sons especially, to work the fields, feed the flocks, fight the wars. Wives and concubines were primarily means to generate these assets, and women were themselves possessions. The commandment against adultery was an admonition not to violate another man's property. That means my brother would own Karen.

The patriarchy is really harsh.

There are still vestiges of ownership in some wedding ceremonies. "Who gives this woman to be married?" was a question of one owner, the father, regarding the transfer of title to a new owner, the husband. Remember that, originally, there was only one wedding ring involved in the ceremony: given to the woman, which, like a leg shackle, indicated that the woman now was under new ownership. It might as well have been engraved, "If found, return to Chandler in Grand Rapids." Yikes.

We reinterpret those symbols more graciously now—we've taken good strides against mindless patriarchy, but what I've highlighted so far are the predominant Old Testament views of marriage. This is simply to say, "One should not invoke 'Biblical morality' unless one specifies what part of Biblical morality you're talking about." And when you're asking about marriage, by and large, the Old Testament models are so patriarchal as to be offensive.

Don't we have an improvement in the New Testament, with the image of one man, one woman, 'til death do us part? Yes, we do, but the power of patriarchy still affects the dominant view, which is most clearly stated in Ephesians 5. This is not the only view; it is nuanced elsewhere, but in Ephesians 5, we read the predominant New Testament model, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife just as Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Savior. Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, subject to their husbands." This was not read at our wedding.

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And, my experience in counseling has been that, if you think you own your wife, you think you can do what you want to your wife. These patriarchal views of marriage have been a breeding ground for abuse. Surely there is nuance behind these, but on the face of them, and in the glib way they are used, they are an incentive to treat women like dirt.

Do we want to make these the measure of our marriages: a man's ownership and power over a woman? Are these the relationships that the church should bless?

But as I said, Karen and I, along with the rest of you here want our relationships to be fully rooted in Biblical values. Does the Bible offer anything about a relationship we can affirm and bless, that can perhaps speak beyond the cultural limitations of Biblical patriarchy?

Yes, and among them is this text from Ruth.

Ruth is a gentile. She is an “other”—an outsider, and she is the widow from a culturally mixed marriage (her husband was Israelite; she Moabite), and since her husband's death, she has no, absolutely none, zero legal obligation or social bond to her former mother-in-law Naomi. There is no familial, no social, no institutional requirement to connect or bind Ruth to Naomi.

And yet, under no obligation, with no social model, Ruth makes this most eloquent covenant commitment to Naomi: “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.” And there is a picture of covenantal love that rings true. So, why? Why does this ring more true to us than the other models we've looked at?

Ruth's words to Naomi seem a perfect expression of loving relationship, because it sounds like God's love for us: free, freely chosen love beyond our expectations; grace, beyond anything earned, and steadfast and faithful. Ruth makes a covenant with Naomi, freely and deeply, and is faithful to it. The great virtue of Ruth's commitment is that it is akin to God's love for us. It is no wonder we consider it appropriate to read it at a wedding, even though these are the pledge of a daughter in law to her mother in law. Her pledge points to something beyond patriarchy and beyond male and female; it points to divine love, to the real stuff that we know makes our relationships beautiful; it's the treasure we find in two partners offering free and unfettered love and fidelity to one another.

The story of Ruth points to the true treasure in all covenant relationships: the relationship between God and us. The covenant which measures all others is God's covenant with humanity. It is freely chosen, and it is characterized by steadfast love. And relationships that reflect that are those the church should bless. It is not who we love, but how we love that always matters to God.

The relationship I know best is 30 years of failing and forgiving, of gratitude and grace, of pain, joy, and love. To claim that the sexuality, the vessel of our marriage in and of itself is any measure of its blessedness, with no reference to the treasure that Ruth articulates, with no reference to mutual respect like Ruth and Naomi's, without concern for our love, work and play within that relationship—cheapens marriage.

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In the public debate over marriage, it's as if we have confused the treasure with the earthen vessel. Heterosexual marriage is a vessel; the real treasure is the steadfastness and fidelity of love.

We bless the vessel, because it holds the treasure.

We bless the vessels for what they hold.

We bless the treasure rather than elevating the clay pot to ultimacy.

We bless love, respect, mutuality, accountability, joy and compassion. These qualities point beyond our human frailties to God's relationship with us. That is the standard, the ultimate covenant to which we aspire in all our relationships. The church should bless and encourage covenantal, faithful relationships wherever they may be found.

I began with my gratitude to you and the church for blessing my relationship with Karen—my gratitude for your blessing us such that she may lodge where I lodge. And I do expect that people will continue to support us, until I have died or Karen has died, and even then offer their continued blessing. Whom should we leave out of such blessing? Chris Glaser is a man who has helped me understand those who do not have the privilege of heterosexual acceptance handed to them. He wrote about the power of a community's blessing: "When my partner's and my relationship was blessed two years ago by our Presbyterian church in Atlanta, I felt transformed by our exchange of vows before God and a supportive community... I felt even more tenderly toward my partner, and I understood more profoundly the sacred nature of our commitment.

"Another male couple attending the ceremony expressed regret that they had never had such a ceremony. Less than two weeks later, one was killed in a traffic accident. Because most members of their congregation were unaware of the significance of their relationship, the surviving partner did not receive the support that might have otherwise been offered... I'm grateful to know that if something were to happen to me or my partner, our congregation ... would be there for us, caring for us in trouble, challenging us to keep faith in God and one another. I grieve that the same cannot be said of all congregations... throughout this land."²

It is the church's task to support one another as we seek to be faithful to our commitments.

Who are we missing, about whom do we not know, who have made their lives vulnerable to one another in love and who must remain hidden and thus be excluded from this critical blessing?

What relationships ought the church to bless?

We ought to bless all those with love in them, those that reflect God's love for us. We ought to bless those relationships that express the covenantal love on Ruth's lips. We ought to bless those

² *Newsweek*, September 16, 1996.

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who seek to preserve her deep Biblical values, *“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.”*³

³ I want to acknowledge three important sources of inspiration in this sermon. Rev. Karen Stokes wrote a sermon many years ago that included some of the Biblical examples used in the center of this sermon, as well as the metaphor of the treasure in earthen vessels, as it relates to covenant and its carriers. Her work served as the primary inspiration for this sermon. Rev. Tom Are wrote a unpublished piece sometime in the last year or so, in which he used the thought that God’s concern is for how we love not whom we love. And that thought has stuck with me. Jeremy Stokes helped in the very final version of this sermon with his keen ear for narrative preaching.