

## ***The Seventh Command: The Troth of Friendship***

Ruth 1:1-18

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This morning I'm preaching on the seventh command, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," as part of a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. I've been trying to turn this into a series on "The Ten Permissions." That is, I think that each of the commandments has a great good that it wants to protect by saying "thou shalt not." I want to identify that great good thing. In the seventh command against adultery that great good thing is "troth," as in, "I plight thee my troth."

But file that word, "troth," for just a minute. I'll get back to it. First, I need to get something out of the way. This is not going to be a sermon about adultery per se, or marriage, or sex. My own sense is that just as the State has no business in the bedrooms of its citizens, as Pierre Trudeau famously said forty years ago; so too, the church has no business in the bedrooms of the congregation. I don't mean by this that everything goes when it comes to sex. As a Christian, I certainly want to encourage everyone, whether in their bedroom or the back seat of the Buick—I encourage everyone to treat each other in loving and kind ways, with full permission and understanding of potential consequences, and a shared willingness to work through those consequences if they come to pass.

However, when it comes to making general rules about personal choices about private sex, the church should stay out of it. Once the principles of love, commitment, and kindness are understood, Christians should be free to work the rest out on their own.

So, back to the great good thing that the Ten Commandments want to protect when they say, "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery." That great good thing is, "troth."

Troth is spelled like truth, except it substitutes an "o" for the "u." Troth is part of the word, "betroth," which is a synonym for "engagement." It is an old English word with even more ancient Germanic roots. It means "truth," but not truth is the sense of two plus two is four. No, it means truth in the sense of "faithfulness," as in "Be true to me," or as in the famous marriage pledge, "I plight thee my troth."

When it comes to adultery, then, the key issue is troth. I define adultery as a failure to be true, to be faithful, to someone you have promised to be true to. In the seventh command, "troth," is the great permission, the great good thing, we are asked to pursue with all our heart, soul, and mind.

But here is the thing. In old English, troth was not limited to marriage. Troth was, rather, the heart and soul of any precious relationship, and perhaps especially of friendships. To betray a friend, even in the English of just 150 years ago, was to break troth with a friend. So, for example,

in a short story by Anatole France, the main character, Ary, falls in love with his best friend's partner, Leilah. He goes to his pastor, an old priest to confess his sin. But interestingly, he isn't broken hearted about making love with Leilah. Not at all. That was good. Instead, Ary confesses that he has broken "troth" with his best friend. Troth, in other words, is faithfulness in any relationship, marriage, for example, or often in old English, friendship.

We don't often think deeply or talk about friendship. We sort of assume, I think, that friendship just happens, that they come and go, like a green lawn in the summer, depending on the rain. So, for example, if your roommate comes home late from a date, and you ask her if she was late because she was out with someone special, she is apt to say, "Oh no. He's just a friend." Friendship isn't a big deal.

We tend to think of friendship as a kid's thing. When we settle on a partner, we often let our single friends drift away. In theology, little is written about friendship. One of the most important books on Christian Ethics, John Macquarrie's *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, covers almost every imaginable relationship, but surprisingly, not friendship. Conservatives talk about family values, but we never hear about friendship values. The ancient pagan Greek Philosophers extolled friendship, but Christians were suspicious of friendship, because friendship was seen as a potential competitor for the love of God—even though Jesus himself called his disciples "friends."

The Bible, on the other hand, never speaks of someone being, "just a friend." When Jonathan died, David sang, "you were very dear to me Jonathan, my brother. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of a woman." Proverbs has it that, "A brother is born for adversity, but a friend loves at all times."

My favourite Biblical friendship, one characterized by troth, is that of Naomi and Ruth. We read part of the story this morning.

When it came to catching her fair share of worldly blessings, Naomi was the sort of person who always missed the bus. She gets married, but the family farm goes bust. She moves to Moab to start over, but her husband dies. And all her boys die. So Naomi is barely forty now, and she doesn't have anything: no home, no money, no IRA's, no prospects—Naomi had nothing at all.

Except for one thing: Naomi had a friend, Ruth.

Now Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth had suffered too, of course. She was a foreign widow to one of Naomi's dead sons. But Ruth had things going for her too. She was a hard worker. Ruth was still young enough to have a spring in her step and a prom dress in her closet. She spoke with a cute Moabite accent that everyone loved. And Ruth was beautiful enough for the farmer on whose farm she worked to warn the boys to leave her alone. But best of all, Ruth had a friend, Naomi.

You don't read about any miracles in Ruth's story; no angels and no amazing displays of the glory of God either. This is a story about plain people living the way they thought God meant

people to live. In fact, it is especially about two people who save each other with troth. Ruth and Naomi walk side by side, no matter what, totally committed to each other's wellbeing. Listen to Ruth's commitment, to Ruth plighting her troth, when both of them have become homeless widows. She says to Naomi, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

I have a friend like that, a companion on the road. Let's say his name is Peter. During college we lived in the same house and didn't get along. I thought he was untidy—to put it as kindly as I can. He thought I was a snob. I thought he was a romantic while I was hard-nosed and practical. We didn't have much in common.

One day, though, years later, Peter and I found ourselves sitting beside each other in a seminary class. Suddenly we were going somewhere together. It was a beginning. We talked about becoming pastors and shared our frustrations and hopes and slowly we became friends—best friends. Now we share in ministry, we taste each other's triumphs and cry over each other's hurts. We drive hours to spend an hour together over a cup of coffee. We are friends because we take pleasure in being companions on the road, in sharing together the same kinds of hopes and ideals for ministry, but mostly, we are committed to each other. We take the time and make the effort to attend to each other.

Troth is mutual commitment—faithfulness, if you will—but what makes troth a joy is kindness. You see, while companionship might start with acquaintance, companionship, even with commitment, cannot by itself sustain a friendship. Companionship and kindness are both key to troth, together.

"Kindness" is one of the Bible's ten most neglected words. It feels insignificant besides big theological words like atonement and sanctification, for example. Still, kindness is key. The book of Ruth is shot through with kindness. Just listen. First, God is kind. When her family dies, Naomi says to Ruth, "May the Lord show kindness to you as you have shown to your dead and to me." Secondly, Ruth is kind to her friend Naomi. When Ruth's future husband, Boaz, meets Ruth, he says, "I've been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband. May the Lord repay you for what you have done." Third, Ruth is kind to Boaz. When she agrees to marry Boaz, Boaz says "The Lord bless you my daughter . . . this kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier, to Naomi!" And finally, Boaz is kind. Naomi says "The Lord bless him! He has not stopped showing his kindness to the living."

What exactly is kindness? Kindness is investing yourself in a friend's fortunes, like you might invest your money in the stock market. Kindness is the business of taking from your limited store of honesty, care, energy and love and spending these things liberally on your friend. Even more, kindness isn't just making the best of this or that opportunity to do a nice thing—kindness is seeking that opportunity, making it come to pass, and then acting on it.

We live in a fractured society. We spend hours alone with our computers, playing games or taking our work home with us. People are so eager to maximize efficiency in friendship that we

can have four or even six hundred friends on Facebook, and then get rid of them as easily as a tap or swipe on our cellphone. People move away for new jobs and opportunities all the time, leaving friends behind. We're so busy that when we finally arrive home at the end of a long day, we're as like to say, "I'm not going out into that traffic again!" as we are to say, "I'm going to visit my friends." People live longer than ever, but often alone, after their partner dies. We, like any church, have our fair share of widows here, for example. It can be lonely after a busy life as a couple, getting ahead, and raising kids.

And one of the best antidotes against the loneliness that often follows from living in our fractured society is friendship—not just a lot of acquaintances, but trothful friendship, full of both kindness and commitment.

You see it doesn't matter your age. It doesn't matter your resources. It doesn't matter what colour your skin is. You need to be a friend—a trothful friend.