

All Saints Sunday  
November 4, 2018  
Brandon McGinnis

### **Pledging to a People**

*I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God.*

That is, in part, the oath of allegiance that an immigrant to the United States must say in order to become a naturalized citizen. Three primary things are happening in this oath: 1) loyalties to foreign powers are renounced, 2) a life of fidelity to and—if necessary—death in defense of this country are promised, and 3) consent to this new allegiance is made before God Himself.

This oath of allegiance is nothing less than a pledge to a people. And this morning we see a similar pledge in our Old Testament lesson.

Ruth, a Moabite by birth, after being repeatedly told by her Judean mother-in-law Naomi not to follow her and to remain in her homeland, refuses and instead makes a formal oath to her: *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!*

Ruth's oath formalizes the bond between her and her mother-in-law: just as Ruth had clung to Naomi, so now she is joined to her family, the two of them sharing a bond stronger than blood.

Pledging oneself to a new people—whether an immigrant becoming a US citizen or a Moabite woman joining a Judean family—means that one's identity is changed and a new life is begun. And these are affected in the three movements of the pledge itself:

- First, in pledging herself to Naomi, Ruth renounces her allegiance to Moab. This is especially significant when we understand that Moab was an ancient enemy of Israel. And in the ancient world, one's tribal ties were not abdicated willingly. Only if one's tribe was conquered by another, would one ever consider pledging allegiance to another people and their God. And yet, because of her unrelenting love for her mother-in-law, Ruth abandons her own mother's house in Moab, choosing a new identity for herself.
- Second, Ruth's oath of fidelity to Naomi means that, from now on, they will do life together. Because they are both widows and are otherwise without economic security, they will have to support—to defend—one another, always working toward each other's benefit. And, what's more, because she is a Moabite, Ruth will likely face danger or even death in the land of Judah among the Israelites. In this way, Ruth is giving up her own life for the love for her mother-in-law. She knows the dangers, but Ruth would rather be buried with Naomi than turn away from her.

- Third and finally, Ruth is given every opportunity to turn back, but she freely chooses to advance. Naomi pleads with her to remain in Moab. But, invoking the name of God – Naomi’s God—Ruth seals her oath under the witness of heaven. She is neither coerced nor hesitant. Rather, she is so resolute that she makes her life accountable to the Almighty for keeping this oath, making her commitment indissoluble.

In all these things—renouncing of old allegiances, adoption of a new way of life, and sealing the oath before God—pledging oneself to a people changes identity and begins life anew.

Today we observe the Feast of All Saints. On this day we remember all those forbearers of faith who have gone ahead of us into glory, making it especially appropriate for baptisms and the renewal of baptismal vows. And in keeping with that custom of the Church, today we will baptize Amelia. We will gather around the font and, on Amelia’s behalf, we will do as Ruth did. For baptism—like the naturalization oath of allegiance or Ruth’s oath to Naomi—is nothing less than a pledge to a people.

For in baptism we make the same three moves: As Ruth willingly renounced her allegiance to Moab, so we renounce all the powers of evil and present ourselves to be conquered by Christ in the waters of the font. As Ruth risked her own life to live among Naomi’s people, so we choose to live together as aliens in the world for the hope or resting among the saints. And, finally, as Ruth made her oath before God, so we give our consent before the Almighty to an indissoluble bond with Christ our Lord.

Baptism is our pledge to a self-giving people and a self-giving God—to the saints and to Christ. According to St. Luke, our changed identity and new life is to be marked by a divinely merciful self-given-ness: goodness given to the hateful, blessings to those who curse, prayer to slanderers. Money to beggars, love to enemies, and support to those who can’t reciprocate. Baptism, then, is a life given over to a life of giving.

This is our spiritual oath of allegiance, and we should take it at least as seriously as we take any national oath of allegiance. For many of the saints we honor today died for this oath, and by this oath we are joined to their hallowed caravan as it makes its way toward refuge in that most heavenly country.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, on this day may we remember Ruth, Naomi, and all the saints who have gone before us. May we remember the oath of allegiance for which they lived and for which they died. And may we remember the self-given-ness that is their heritage. For into these things we are baptized. And into these things we will baptize Amelia. As Ruth clung to her mother-in-law, May we cling to Mother Church this day; so help us God. Amen.

Ruth 1:1-18

Hebrews 9:11-14

[Luke 6:27-38]