

## FREEDOM OR COMMITMENT?

Ruth 1: 1-18

Freedom is a big word... So is commitment... What do you need freedom from or more freedom from? Is it freedom from some commitment? Do commitments complicate your life and weigh you down? Are some commitments worth it even if they do weigh you down? Or, do you need more freedom and simplicity in your life, period?

Well, one of the things I did to prepare for this sermon is google “simplicity as a lifestyle.” Here’s what I got:

“Simplicity as a lifestyle... is the practice of intentionally reducing physical possessions, commitments, and distractions. Simplicity as a lifestyle aims to minimize stress and consumerism, redirecting your time and energy toward deep relationships, personal growth, and experiences that truly matter.”

And what are the benefits of choosing simplicity as a lifestyle:

- **More Mental Clarity:** removing excess choices and physical clutter helps eliminate decision fatigue and everyday anxiety.
- **Financial Freedom:** Spending less on non-essentials reduces the pressure to work excessive hours, giving you greater control over your time and finances.
- **Deeper Focus:** A slower, more intentional pace allows you to be more fully present and mindful of the everyday moments that bring joy.

And what are some practical ways to adopt simplicity as a lifestyle:

- **Digital Minimalism:** Audit your screen time. Turn off non-essential notifications, unsubscribe from newsletters you don’t read, and limit social media.
- **Declutter Your Space:** Adopt a “one in, one out” rule for clothing and household items to keep your environment calm and manageable.
- **Simplify Your Schedule:** Learn to say “no” to commitments that do not align with your core values or goals. Leave white space in your calendar.
- **Single-Tasking:** Dedicate your full attention to one thing at a time rather than constantly multitasking, which reduces stress and improves quality and effectiveness.

And here’s a concluding statement taken from 2 websites: [becomingminimalist.com](http://becomingminimalist.com) and [balancethroughsimplicity.com](http://balancethroughsimplicity.com):

“Adopting a simple lifestyle is not a step backward, but rather a step toward living a life guided by your own inner compass rather than external noise.”

OK, so what do you think? For me personally, all of this is wonderful and highly needful advice and counsel. I definitely need to adopt more simplicity in my lifestyle. But the one thing I also noticed from checking some of the websites and descriptions on simplicity as a lifestyle more thoroughly, is a bit of confusion with the words "freedom" and "commitment." While it is clear that there are many things we need freedom from, it is not always clear what we need freedom for. Is open space, simplicity and less stress enough? And while it is clear that too many of us have too many commitments in our lives we need to let go, what commitments are worth keeping and what commitments are worth taking up even if they may complicate our lives, make demands on us and even add stress to our lives? If the fulfillment, meaning, purpose and joy also come with the demands, complications and stress, are such commitments not worthwhile?

There is a wonderfully funny and thoughtful film that came out 15 years ago, a Hollywood blockbuster starring George Clooney called: "Up In The Air." Has anyone seen it? Do you remember it? Clooney's character: Ryan Bingham, plays a corporate downsizer – someone whose job it is to fire people on behalf of various companies. Ryan is always on a plane travelling all over the world meeting people face to face in order to fire them. But Ryan also sees his work and his life constantly "up in the air" going from place to place and seeing people he will never see again. It has become a lifestyle for him. He has no serious commitments to family, friends or even the people he is firing. The problem, though, is that his life is empty and meaningless. No serious commitments to people, to values and relationships that bind you and root you makes of your life something superficial and always "up in the air."

In the end, this all catches up to Ryan, and this is what makes the movie impactful. Commitments make life meaningful, but also demanding and complicated. You can't have one without the other. We may need fewer commitments in our lives, but we need deeper commitments in our lives too. If freedom simply means the freedom to do whatever you want whenever you want to do it, this is definitely going to collide with your commitments if such commitments have substance. Commitments pin you down, and if a person you are committed to is going through a rough time or if a situation you are committed to working through is complicated and stressful, you can't just opt out in order to live more simply and less stressed.

OK, fair point preacher. So how do we discern what commitments are worth making and what commitments simply burden our lives and weigh them down with needless stress and complexity?

Well, let's dive into our scripture reading in search of revelatory wisdom. The story of Ruth is one of the most beautiful stories in our scriptures. And it is a story all about commitment. There is a Hebrew family who out of economic necessity become refugee-immigrants in a foreign land called Moab. Thankfully, Moab doesn't reject them because they are anti-

immigration. And even though they make it economically with hard work and contribute much to the local economy, tragedy breaks the family apart. At first, it is the loss of the patriarch of the family, a man named Elimelech. But rather than weaken the family, surviving mother and sons deepen their commitment to their new homeland by marrying local women and more fully integrating themselves with the local population. But then, there is more tragedy as not only one but both sons die. Now, there are three women left, and for the mother of the family - Naomi, a special vulnerability of being an old woman in a foreign land.

So what to do? Naomi feels her only choice is to return to Israel and her hometown. There she will be taken in by the community and find, perhaps, some consolation for her staggering loss and misfortune. But despite her grief, Naomi is also gracious and generous with her daughters-in-law. Rather than burden them with the care of a mother-in-law, she wants to release them from any obligation, freeing them as young women to rebuild their lives in their own country and among their own people.

The scene of this exchange between mother-in-law and daughters-in-law is beautifully poignant. Clearly there is a lot of love within this family unit even as they come from very different cultures and nationalities. The one daughter-in-law agrees, reluctantly and with many tears, to do as Naomi tells her and leave. She will go off and seek to rebuild her life. She has given herself fully and completely but is now free of any existing commitments.

Ruth, on the other hand, will hear none of it. Let's listen again to her incredibly beautiful response to Naomi who tells her to leave and be free:

"Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge;

Your people will be my people and your God my God.

Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!"

Wow, what commitment! Even as Ruth has been urged to claim her freedom and her chance to rebuild her life, she chooses to commit herself to Naomi and whatever fate awaits her in this commitment. Now, is this a smart or sensible decision for Ruth? No. Is she choosing to step back from all the tragedy and misfortune and choose her freedom to rebuild her life again? No. Her commitment to Naomi and whatever will come to be will make incredible demands on her and bind her to uncertainty, stress and great vulnerability. Ruth is a young woman going into a foreign land with an old woman who has lost everything and has little standing or resources. It's nothing short of stepping into disaster!

And yet, why does this story so deeply touch us at the heart level? Because we feel that giving up our freedom for deep commitments, loyalties and values that include great demand and sacrifice at times, make of our lives something profound and richly meaningful. The story of

Ruth teaches us that true meaning and joy in our lives cannot come simply by freedom. No. It's our commitments that truly make our lives richly rewarding.

But what commitments exactly? For Ruth and Naomi, it is about commitments to people who become family well beyond blood. But what are the values behind and within such commitments to persons whether human, non-human, the earth under our feet or the quality of the air we all share?

Here I'd like us to reflect a little on our membership questions. Rather than rules for behaviour or beliefs about doctrines, they are all about commitments, commitments to values and very practical, everyday values. And these commitments to specific values are anything but easy or uncomplicated. This is why each and every one of our five questions begin with these words: "With the enabling of God's grace." Grace is the gift of love, love as energy, and it is God's Holy Spirit embodied in Jesus that carries such gift-love into our hearts. Without such gift-love, without such grace as energy given to us each and every day, through each and every situation, relationship and episode in our lives, we cannot fulfill the commitments we are choosing to embrace.

And what are these commitments? It's about praying for discernment to choose what is right and resist what is wrong in our lives and in the world. It is about seeking to learn what it means to follow Jesus and become his hands, feet, voice and heart for each other and in our world. It is about choosing the way of forgiveness even when it's the hardest thing. It's about choosing the way of truth and justice with a commitment to reconciliation if possible and resisting the demon of vengeance and retaliation so deeply possessing people in our world. Finally, such commitments can only be supported within community, a particular community we are called to commit to practically and spiritually.

All of this is a lot. It demands a lot. It can become complicated living according to such commitments when so much of the current in our world wants to push us away from such commitments and into a freedom to do what we want, to whomever we want, and whenever we want to do it.

Yes, we need to simplify our lives and get free of commitments or distractions that suck the spiritual life out of us. But we also need to figure out what commitments are worthwhile. And then we have to plant some deep roots with such commitments so that we won't be so buffeted by the storms of life. Even as we may get blown here and there in times of crisis, our commitments remind us of where the light is and how we may find our way back after the grief, the anger or the confusion. And as we commit and re-commit ourselves to values that are worthwhile, we grow stronger and life becomes more abundant, even alongside the scars of hurt and loss.

Do you believe this? What are your commitments: to people, to values? What most deeply roots you? Where may God in Jesus and through the Spirit energize you with the grace that enables you to climb the highest mountains and traverse the deepest valleys?

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, come... empower us to fulfill your call to us to honour commitments that can truly provide abundance and peace in our lives.

Amen.