

I hope we all know it's Covenant Sunday around here this morning. Since "covenant" is not a common word, or concept, in our English language, it may be that we know more about what a "covenant" is not than what it is. For instance:

A young woman wrote, on the "Craig's List" website, "I am a spectacularly beautiful 25 year-old girl. I'm articulate and classy. I'm looking to marry a guy who makes at least a half a million bucks a year. Where do you single, rich men hang out?" She also wanted to know how men actually decided between "marriage versus just a girlfriend. I am looking for marriage only."

Her query got a response from a prospective partner. He claimed to meet her financial requirements, but observed that from his perspective her offer was a lousy business deal. "What you suggest is a simple trade: you bring your looks to the party, and I bring my money," he wrote. "But here's the rub: Your looks will fade while my money will continue to grow. So in economic terms you are a depreciating asset while I am an earning asset."

The man continued to explain this is why "it doesn't make good business sense for me to 'buy you', which is really what you're asking." He then made a counterproposal, which did make sense to him. Why not try dating? "Let me know if you want to enter into some sort of lease agreement."

She seemed to be confusing a covenant with a contract, which he seemed to be willing to explain to her. But she's probably not the only one a bit unclear on exactly what a "covenant" is. Or why we in this church celebrate "Covenant Sunday," for that matter.

A "covenant" relationship seems to be God's first choice for an enduring, reciprocally respectful and beneficial, freely-entered into commitment of self-giving for the mutual blessing of both or all covenant partners. I figure the "covenant" relationship is the happy medium between two extremes: neither the fear- or force-driven, externally imposed form of a relationship which strives to mandate and preserve a relationship no matter what, nor the "free-to-come-and-go-as-you-please-as-long-as-you-feel-like-it" relationship with no more glue to it than hormones and perceived mutual immediate self-gratification.

A "new covenant" implies one or more previous covenants. Many of you know there were three primary Old Testament covenants into which God entered—with Noah, with Abraham, and with Moses. The divine covenant with Moses at Sinai, and with Yahweh's [God's] covenant partners the Israelites, was the one most immediately preceding this future "new covenant" God promised to Jeremiah, some six centuries before Jesus, in our lesson this morning.

At the base of Mt. Sinai the Israelites had freely responded to Moses' proposal, inviting the people to enter into their covenant relationship. "We will," they shouted together, "'All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.'" [Exodus 24:3] They freely chose to enter into this covenant. Yet you may have noticed that now in Jeremiah, some seven centuries later, God says, "...I will be their God, and they shall be My people..." [31:33] It's as if God is now is playing both sides.

Has God given up on them and decided to override their free will? [Some teach that cowering before an all-powerful God not bound by love nor mercy is the highest

form of faithfulness.] Has an authoritarian God finally decided to impose this covenant relationship upon them, if even for their own good?

On the contrary: the God of Moses and Jesus is continuing to trust in a covenant people who have betrayed that trust over and over again. (For decades, about this time of year, football season, Charles Schulz used to include the cartoon strip in which Charlie Brown would naively trust Lucy to hold up the football he was going to kick for a field goal. They'd discuss it, he would convince himself that this was the time she was going to keep her promise, he'd go back for that long run-up, start running to kick it—and the result was too predictable to need to describe.)

Throughout the centuries, God keeps promising, God keeps faithful. God keeps trusting in them, even though they do not deserve that trust in the least and even though God bears the heartbreak of that broken promise, that trust betrayed. “Even when I took you by the hand; even though I was your faithful husband and you two-timed me—still I will trust in You, and “put it out there” with you and for you, My beloved covenant people, all over again.” (Have any of you ever had your heart broken by one in whom you invested your “all”? Have you ever suffered a divorce, or the death of a beloved spouse?) So God has suffered—but God's partner is an entire people.

Imagine God's love. Instead of giving us what we deserved—the consequences of our faithlessness (remember that flood)—God was telling Jeremiah “I have decided I'm going to risk everything all over again.” God then redefined His vows: not because His covenant partners merited a new covenant—but because they did not, and because God is love. God has decided He will not “dump us” and move on to a new more faithful spouse and give us what we deserve. Not back then, when the Israelites went after false gods; not today when we may or may not have kept our last year's covenant completely, may or may not have been fully trusting and obedient in how we covenant to partner with God for 2008.

When Israel's ill behavior nullified the covenant; when we ignore our promises to God—in His forgiving mercy, God reinstates His covenant and commits Himself to us all over again. God sees us as faithful partners before we see ourselves that way; before we actually are. Each one of us is somewhere along that path: presumably more trusting than we used to be, less trusting that we'd like to be, and far less trusting than God sees us as being. God is not foolish. God is not stupid. God simply keeps giving us the benefit of the doubt. God keeps seeing us as so much more than we have yet been willing to become.

If ever we doubt this theme so prominent in the “new covenant” promise in Jeremiah (“for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” [v 34]) we need look no further than Jesus the Christ. God paid us the high compliment of visiting this planet in Jesus the Son. There was nothing about our human or religious track record to suggest that we would treat our Lord Jesus any better than we did, but still “the Word [Jesus] became flesh and came to live among us as a human being.” [John 1:14] Sure enough, we pulled back the terrestrial football—and failed to acknowledge our Lord, and failed to follow Him, and then had Him crucified for His trouble, to repay the high compliment God paid us. It's impossible, literally impossible, for us to comprehend how the covenant faithfulness of God has cost God. Still, He loves us, trusts us, leaves us

freely to decide whether or how we will follow Him; whether and how we will covenant to serve Him.

Did you notice: God's main hope even back then, even when the Law was in effect, even before Jesus had come and His Holy Spirit had been unleashed at Pentecost—the goal even during the period of the Law was that “all would come to know Me.” Paul later observed in Galatians, through inspired hindsight, that the purpose of the machinery of the Law, all those commandments to keep, had been to bring God's covenant people, and ultimately all people, into loving relationship with Him. Simply to “know” Him more closely, more immediately, more intimately.

Just think: the God of the Bible does not want, never did want, for you to “take somebody else's word for it” that God loves you. God wants you to know, feel, experience, live differently for knowing—down deep in your heart, your brain, your spirit, your being—that God loves you. “God is no respecter of persons;” God is as thrilled for a child to know Him and trust Him, to enter into the Kingdom, as for a university president or the Secretary General of the United Nations.

Not only does God yearn for you and me to come to know Him in a life-changing way, for our old self to be shattered by His mercy and forgiveness which keeps risking, keeps trusting in us. God was already promising He would enter into us and soften our hearts, when we could not do so, for the earnest asking. Although we are incapable of loving God as dearly as God desires, God does not leave us there. God has promised to soften our hearts, to place the ability to love Him back (and others forward) within us if we will but humbly ask. (This principle of “humbly asking” is, of course, the primary Christian theme of repentance.)

[Hence Jesus' very first, kerygmatic (sorry about that: the “kerygma” is the Message all boiled down) preaching of the gospel: “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom has come near: Repent, and believe in the good news.” [Mark 1:14] There's no pleasing some folks; to repent and ask God to change our hearts, our attitudes, requires some humility. Some people, one wit observed, “would rather be a General in hell than a soldier in heaven.”]

God does not want us to be merely rules-keepers, or to relate to Him in cringing servility, bowing and scraping. He set the Israelites free from the slavemasters in Egypt; God did not go to all that trouble to set them free from Pharaoh only to have them later bow and scrape before Him. He set them free in order for them freely to obey Him—but not as slaves obeying out of fear of external punishment but rather as “family,” choosing to obey Him out of love and gratitude.

It was Jesus, after all, who taught His followers to call God the Father “Abba,” “Daddy.” This familiarity, this freedom before God, was scandalous to the religious authorities then, and still is to some today. God wants willing free covenant partners, not slaves. (Was it Savannah, Georgia where Abraham Lincoln was reputed to have purchased a female slave at auction? She was, of course, angry, fiercely suspicious. “What do you want with me?” she glowered at him when he showed interest. “I want to pay the price of your freedom so you can walk away a totally free woman.” “What do you want with me,” she asked him again, incredulous. “I want to purchase you so you can go wherever you want.” “Then I want to go with you.”)

On Covenant Sunday we each one of us may freely and humbly submit once again, (admittedly, somewhat formally) to obedient partnership with the God of the covenants, old and new. In offering our lives to our Lord Jesus, in approaching God the Father as “Daddy,” in yielding management of our day-to-day lives to the Holy Spirit, we recognize we also enter into a new relationship with our sisters and brothers in Christ, children recognizing the same Father—we enter into a new family.

The purpose of our “covenant system” of membership is to try to treat one another as God treats us. As freely covenanting partners entering together into enduring relationships for mutual blessing and enrichment. Our covenant system pays each one of us a very high compliment: we assume that each member, left alone, will diligently pray, will seek the will of God thru the Holy Spirit, and will each one enter into the disciplines God has for us and step forward to accept the assignments God has for us.

Our system helps us to resist the temptation to coerce or pressure people to accept this or that responsibility based on what we may think the church needs. (We distinguish between informing the church family of where we stand and what the church may need, and trying to pressure or whine anyone into externally imposed obedience. The former is perfectly legitimate and necessary, and you will be hearing a financial state of the church message from our chair of the Board of Deacons before long. The latter—whining or dunning until someone gives up and finally says, “OK, OK, if my church needs it that badly, I guess I’ll do it” does not produce anything very pleasing to God or to us in the long run. Trying to force a round hole into a square peg doesn’t work very well. Obeying the Holy Spirit is what works very well!)

You and I are each responsible for how we understand our covenant, and how we choose to support Christ and His Church. I’d like to share with you something of how I understand our covenanting together to be Christ’s Church here—Community Church.

I am grateful to be part of a church in which so many of you come together with humble hearts, “the greatest and the least together.” Many of you are very accomplished in your spheres of expertise, yet when you come here you often come to listen, and learn, and serve. I think of Joe DiChiro on his hands and knees sealing every inch of grout on the kitchen floor, hour after hour, for example, or our evening liaisons with the neighbors and our Recovery Groups—giving up one evening a week simply to monitor the proceedings. Some of you running your own businesses, yet willing to bake and deliver a dinner for a member laid low following surgery, or giving birth, or other circumstances.

I have a special appreciation for those members among us in financial need. There are some very hard and capable workers and entrepreneurs, very devoted parents, who thru one circumstance or another, one downsizing or another, fall upon very harrowing financial times. This is not an easy church to be part of, where so many of us think so little of having so much, when you have little. To keep covenanting to be part of this family, without envy or without rancor, takes a great courage. Such courage is not lost on our Lord.

Many people spend all week avoiding being confronted with the truth about themselves, avoiding looking very deeply into the mirror, under the surface. Yet each of you risks all that and more each time you come to worship God, or to trust and to participate in your small group or in a Retreat. Apart from the Holy Spirit, it’s not easy

to keep offering yourself for instruction, for correction—to let God or others in behind the masks we all wear.

When you submit your covenant, you freely offer your gifts: your time and talents and treasure. We have room for improvement in these respects as a church (last week I focused on tithing, the financial component of our covenant membership—this morning we narrowly missed a sermon on tithing our time and our conversation.) This year I have noted a theme expressed by more than one committee chair and Faith Team leader: sometimes the vast level of preparation and responsibility and activity for doing the work to keep everything going in this very busy church falls onto a very few shoulders. (We all know the simple rule of thumb: how well would the church thrive and grow if everyone else offered the proportion of their time and energy and commitment that I do? Would there be a church to be part of if everyone responded to the Holy Spirit as fully I do?) I fear sometimes our failure to solicit help is heard as “They must not need me. It must all be under control.” Your church may well need you. It’s always OK to ask, and always OK to offer. If the Spirit nudges you to do so, the Church needs to find a place for you.

In submitting our covenant I understand each of us is freely and willingly choosing to become part of the Spirit’s plan to enlarge the church family. In my opinion we also have room for improvement in this respect. Jesus came to “seek and save the lost;” His faithful followers are delighted, in our own individual styles, to likewise keep inviting others into deeper relationship with Him. We are being true to Him when we are happy to find someone else sitting in our normal spot in our favorite pew; when our desire for others to find peace and discover new Life in knowing Jesus overcomes our desire to be able to know almost everybody at “our” church; when we keep inviting others into the small group we so love until we ourselves get promoted into a new group when we get beyond feasibility. We, the church, have entered into a new kind of relationship with some of our neighbors; do those within walking distance of us see this as a “community church” or as a club to which they are not invited? Is it their responsibility to venture in to come check us out, or our privilege to begin to reach out to them? Do we remember that the Marshallese are part of Christ’s Church? Are we helping to strengthen them as Jesus would like?

Many of you faithfully submit and keep your covenant, although you know that to be a follower of Jesus is to file for divorce from the tyranny of your ego, from the desire for immediate gain. Instead of asking, “What do I want?” you commit to ask and keep asking, “What are You asking of me, Spirit? What does Your church need from me, dear Jesus, and what may I offer, in order to please You completely?”

I believe that you covenant members of this church also freely forfeit your right to gossip, to quibble, to feed the petty little unholy dramas, to “go negative” in any way. You agree to be responsible members of the family; to communicate proactively if you have a misunderstanding with someone else (including your pastors!) We members of this church have enjoyed a rare blessing for some time: this has been generally a “negativity free zone” for a long time. It does not stay that way accidentally. The enemy doesn’t sleep forever. Thank you for signing away your rights to feed into any negativity.

In turning in your covenants, many of you willingly agree to quit worshipping your own comfort, your own security, your own personal desires. So many people work hard

all week so they can gratify themselves on the weekend; so many people work hard so they can “veg out” under the spell of amusement or entertainment or mood enhancers. You are willing to trust God to keep you going, keep you inspired. You are willing to spend Sunday mornings at worship; you are willing gradually to give up on answering the question “How am I feeling?” to “Are you pleased with me, Lord God?” You are willing to enter into an uneasy truce with your main comfort becoming the discomfort of growth, and maturing, and greater awareness and gratitude. Not everyone is willing to endure to the end and be saved—but here many of you are. God bless you.

In submitting your covenant of membership, you are also signing off your rights to career security. (“What career security?” some of our most faithful begin to lament.) You come to understand your essential security is not in your stock options nor home equity appreciation—but in saying “Yes” to the will of God for your life, in accepting the God-assignment you now understand. Your security comes, increasingly, in your willingness to wrestle with the Spirit, and then and obey whatever You hear. Not everyone would put up with such an unsettling definition of “security.” It helps that you recognize that the eternal security and joy which can never be taken from you comes from your “knowing” God in Christ. You know your “heart relationship” with the living God makes the spiritual journey very much worth your trouble.

In covenanting to join this church, some would say you ought to be willing to submit to perpetual periodic psychiatric examination. The more seriously you cling to Christ the more your understanding of “normal” will deviate from the norm of those all around you. In Christ, you will increasingly recognize the popular culture as not merely hollow and pathetic, but ultimately heartbreaking and terribly destructive. (It’s one thing to roll our eyes that so many in the Media seem so preoccupied with the exploits of popular faves Paris and Britney and Nicole and Ashley—don’t forget O.J.—but it’s not so funny to fast forward and envision a republic in which tens of millions do not know the difference between nobility and notoriety, virtue and vice.) In relationship to Jesus, the Light of the world, you are able to recognize the glitz and glamour of Hollywood as the radioactive glow of a declining culture in decay. (Terminal, but for the Holy Spirit of God.)

You and I have been offered life-changing freedom in Christ. Our covenant system of membership is designed to treat each one of us as a beloved, trusted, and irreplaceable member of His family.

How we covenant back is our response to the forgiveness and mercy God freely offers us.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt--a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

