

RENEWING OUR COVENANTS

(10/4/09)

Scripture Lesson: 1 Corinthians 12:4-13, 27-31

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

This past summer I officiated as two couples renewed their marital vows, one after ten years of marriage and the other after twenty. As they renewed their vows they reaffirmed their commitment to the sacred covenant between them. The two occasions, the two celebrations, led me to reflect on the covenantal dimension of marriage and how this both expresses and shapes what I would call the spiritual dimension of marriage.

This morning we renewed the covenant we made on October 5, 1997 and renew each year as pastor and parishioners. This is our twelfth anniversary. According to Jim Holmes, mine is the longest pastorate in the 144-year history of this church. It is my longest ministry in any parish. In the twelve years we have been together we have shaped each other deeply and helped to build something very special in this church.

There are four dimensions of the covenant we renewed this morning. The first is our covenant with God. Our covenant with God is an expression of our relationship with God. Just as in the covenant of marriage, our covenant with God is an expression of our commitment to deepen this relationship and to place God in the center of our life.

The theme of covenant is a central aspect of the Judeo-Christian faith. Israel drew its identity from the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. In this covenant, God promises Israel that he will be their God if they will be his people.

In what we think of as the “old covenant,” God tells Israel that if they remain true to the covenant, they will prosper. If they break the covenant by worshiping false gods or not observing the Law, they will suffer. God will “turn his face away” from them and use other nations or natural events like famines to punish them.

Jesus offers us a new covenant, a covenant that is articulated in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Whether the errant son is symbolic of the nation of Israel, the Christian church, or us as individuals, the response of the father bends toward mercy rather than justice, toward restoration rather than punishment. The father welcomes the son back with open arms. Even though the son did not behave responsibly, the father never stops loving him. The father shows his son “the love that will not let me go.”

This morning, as we renew our covenant with God, let us think of our covenant as a recommitment to the process of rediscovery. Let us rediscover the Spirit of God that is present within us and among us, and then be open to how God’s indwelling presence can both shape our church and turn our life journey into a spiritual journey.

The second dimension of the covenant we renewed this morning is our covenant with this church. When we became members of this church we entered into a covenant. We promised to support our church with our time, talent, and treasure. We promised to be faithful in attending worship and responsive to opportunities to grow in the faith. We made a commitment to maintain and strengthen this community of faith.

People generally come to church because they want something or they need something. In this post-denominational age, when people move into a community they do not automatically affiliate with the denomination within which they were raised. Most people search for a church where they feel comfortable. They want a church where they are touched by the worship service, inspired, enlightened, or challenged by the sermon. They want a church where they feel welcomed and valued. They want a church that can provide their children with a Christian education.

The covenantal dimension of our church membership is a reminder that church membership is not just about receiving. When we become members we make certain promises to our church. Paul tells us that each of us is a part of the body of Christ, and that each part of the body has its own function. Just as with the human body, our church could not survive if any of the parts were missing.

In our scripture reading, Paul tells us that the body does not consist of one member but of many. The church is more than the pastor. As we affirm in our church bulletin every Sunday, I am your pastor but we are all ministers. Paul tells us. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

We all have gifts that we can and should share with our church. Paul tells us that our gifts are manifestations of the Spirit. He says "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

Then Paul says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." "For the common good." These gifts have been given to us that we might share them. We covenant to share our gifts in response to the many needs of our church.

Third, we covenant to support each other as pastor and parishioners. Our covenant is an expression of our commitment to each other, our commitment to minister to each other. The litany in which we joined is not a job description but a statement of our mutual responsibilities. If we fulfill our covenant with each other, our church will grow into fullness of life as a Christian church.

We renew our covenant every year because we need to be reminded of our promises. We need to remember to be sensitive to each other. We need to remember to be patient, accepting, and quick to forgive real or imagined slights, real or imagined offenses. We need to care for each other. If we remain true to the promises we made to each other this morning, our relationship as pastor and parishioners will deepen.

The fourth dimension of our covenant involves our ministry outside this church. We covenant to share our faith in word and deed. This covenant finds expression in our support of and involvement in missions. It finds expression in the programs that seek to minister to people outside our walls. It finds expression in the ways we bring our faith, our values to bear on situations in our daily life, e.g., in the shaping of social policy.

Jesus tells his disciples to “go and bear fruit.” Although our faith is an inner matter, it is not totally an inner matter. It would be a strange faith that did not bear fruit in word and deed. It would be a strange faith that did not feel a call to respond to the plight of Tibetan refugees, of women who have been raped, of families in our own state that go to bed hungry, of young men in the prison system who desperately need to discover the truth and inner presence that we celebrate every Sunday morning.

There are various times in the year and in our lives when we renew and reaffirm our covenants. On October 18 two young children in our church will be baptized. During the baptismal service we invite those present to remember their own baptism and to reaffirm the covenantal dimension of their relationship with God that was symbolized in that event. On communion Sunday, as we gather around the table with our Lord just as the disciples did at the time of the Last Supper, we renew our covenant with Jesus to grow in discipleship through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Several years ago I read of an incident that took place somewhere in the Midwest. A little child was lost. The searchers looked all over the area for several days with no success. Finally someone suggested that the searchers join hands and walk through the fields together. When they did this, they found the child’s body.

When the news people interviewed the searchers, they heard the same sentiment expressed over and over: “I just wish we had joined hands earlier.”

Today, on Recovenanting Sunday, we renew our covenant with God, with our church, with each other as pastor and parishioner, and with those in tremendous need throughout the world. Let us join both our hands and our hearts as we join in the Sacrament of Holy Communion and as we consecrate our covenant, our promises to God, our church, each other, and the world for the year to come.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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