

RENEWING OUR COVENANT RELATIONSHIPS

(10/07/18)

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 8:8-12
1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 27-31
John 15:12-17

“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 Cor. 12:4-7)

This morning we renewed the covenant we made on October 5, 1997 and renew each year as pastor and parishioners. This is our twenty-first anniversary. My pastorate with you has been much longer than that of any other minister in the 153-year history of this church. Other than my counseling practice, which began back in the 1970s and my 24 ½ years of a teaching ministry at Assumption College, this has been my longest ministry in any of the many and varied settings to which I have been called.

There are four dimensions of the covenant we renewed this morning. The first is our covenant with God. We promise to follow God’s teaching, to strive to deepen our relationship with God, and to place God in the center of our life.

Our covenant with God is a central aspect of our faith. Israel was a covenant people. They drew their 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.

If Israel remains true to the covenant, they will prosper. If Israel deviates from the covenant by worshiping false gods, forgetting its history, or not observing the Law as articulated in the Torah, they will suffer. God will “turn his face away” from them and use other nations to punish them.

Jesus offers us a new covenant. This new covenant 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 chose to leave the father and squander his gifts in dissolute living, the father never stopped loving him. The father shows his son “the love that wilt not let me go.”

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus is the “mediator” of this new covenant. In the new covenant, God seeks to guide us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews also tells us that God is in our hearts. If this is true, then we can never be separated from God.

This morning, as we renew our covenant with God, let us think of our covenant not only as promises that we made as pastor and parishioners many years ago, but also as a process of rediscovery. Let us covenant to discover or rediscover that law that is written on our hearts, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the risen Christ within us. If we do so, this covenant will lead us into an ever deepening and evolving relationship with God.

The second dimension of the covenant we renewed this morning is our covenant with this church. When we became members, we entered into a covenant with this church. 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 little community of faith.

People come to church because they want or need something. You are here this morning because you want or 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. Some do. For some it is important that they belong to a Methodist or a Presbyterian church. Most people, however, search for a church where they feel comfortable. They want a church where they are touched by the worship service, inspired or enlightened by the sermon. They want a church where they feel welcomed and valued. They want a church that can provide their children with a healthy religious education, a religious education that will provide a foundation on which they can build for the rest of their life.

Our covenant as parishioners is a reminder that church membership is not just about receiving. In this covenant, 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.

Paul tells us that the body does not consist of one member but of many. The church is more than the pastor. As our church bulletin affirms every Sunday, I am your pastor, but we are all ministers. Paul says, “Now *you* are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

We all have gifts 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 something that I think is very important. He tells us, “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 need to claim our gifts and covenant to share them in response to the many needs of our church. We need to claim our gifts and covenant to share them in response to the many needs of our world.

Third, we covenant to support each other as pastor and parishioners. We have a commitment to each other, a ministry to each other. The litany in which we joined is not a job description; it is 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 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, and it will bear fruit for us and for our church.

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 many ways we bring our faith, our values to bear on outside situations, e.g., in the electoral process and the shaping of social policy.

With regard to social policy, which I believe is a legitimate focus of Christian concern, I don't use my sermons to tell you how you should vote; to do so would be an abuse of the authority that is vested in me as your pastor. It would be an abuse of the freedom of the pulpit that is such an important part of our religious tradition. What I try to do, however, is to raise your consciousness of the religious values, of the human values, of the Christian values that I believe should be shaping social policy, national policy, and international policy so that you can see more clearly what kind of choices lie before you on your electoral ballot. I try to challenge you to see these pressing social issues from a very important perspective: I challenge you to see them through the heart and mind of Jesus and to respond as he would have you respond.

Jesus tells his disciples to “go and bear fruit.” Although our faith is personal, an inner matter, it is not totally an inner matter. As we noted this summer in our reflections on the Letter of James to the early church, 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 and women 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 the covenants we have made. When a child is baptized, the parents enter into a covenantal relationship with their child and with the church. During the baptism service, we invite all those present not only to remember their own baptism, but also to reaffirm the covenant with God that was symbolized in that event. On communion Sunday, we gather around the table with our Lord just as the disciples did at the time of the Last Supper, renewing our covenant to grow in discipleship, to grow as both disciples and apostles through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This past week I read of an incident that took place in a place that had experienced torrential rain, flooding, and landslides. In this particular area, a little child had become lost. The searchers spread out and searched the area for several days with no success. Finally, someone suggested that the searchers join hands and walk over the area 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 around this communion table as we consecrate our covenant, our promises, for the year to come.

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