

A COVENANT PEOPLE

(10/06/19)

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 8:8-12

Mark 6:6b-13

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; . . . I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Hebrews 8:8,10)

This morning we renewed our covenant, the promises we made on October 7, 1997 and still make to each other and to our church each year as pastor and parishioners. I can't believe this is our twenty-second anniversary! And we're still friends . . . (I hope)!

We often speak of our church as a family. When we review the names on our prayer list, we speak of “members and friends of our church family.” We have a family feeling in our church, a feeling of closeness and intimacy. This may be attributable to the fact that we are small enough that every single member knows every single member. This doesn't happen in larger churches. It may also be attributable to the fact that we eat together a lot—as families do! Following our worship service, we will gather downstairs for a pot-luck luncheon, and, from a cursory glance at what people have brought, we will have more than enough food! No one ever goes away from our church hungry! (I hope this is true spiritually, as well.)

Like many families, some members are closer and more active than others. Like a family, it causes us pain when members of our family drift away, when they never attend worship, do not support the church financially, and are not involved in the life and work of the church. We miss them in many ways, not simply for what they can contribute. We miss their presence. It's like having a family member who doesn't care enough to attend family functions and celebrations. I know—this is life nowadays. But it still causes us pain.

This morning I would like us to think about that which binds us together, which makes us a family. It seems to me that at the heart of this is the richness, the binding power of covenant. And so, I would like us to think about the covenant that we entered into when we became members of the church, when we had our children baptized, and when we received a call to become disciples and apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are four dimensions of the covenant we renewed this morning. The first, and most important, is our covenant with God. We covenant to deepen our relationship with God, to follow God's teaching and guidance, and to place God in the center of our psyche, our life.

The second is our covenant with this church. When we became members of this church, we vowed to support this church with our time, talent, and treasure, to be faithful in attending worship and responsive to opportunities to grow in the faith. We promised to do whatever we could to build, maintain, and strengthen the little community of faith that is this church.

The third is the covenant relationship we have with each other as pastor and parishioners. The litany in which we participated this morning is not a job description of your pastor; it is an articulation of our mutual responsibilities as we minister faithfully to each other.

The fourth dimension involves our mission outreach, our ministry outside ourselves, the many ways we reach out to those in need. This also finds expression in how we bring our faith, our values to bear on social situations, e.g., in the shaping of social policy.

At various times in our lives we renew and reaffirm those covenants that are important or sacred to us. We might renew the covenant vows of our marriage on a special anniversary. When a child is baptized, the parents reaffirm the covenant dimension of their relationship with God. On communion Sunday, we gather around the table with our Lord just as the disciples did at the Last Supper, renewing our commitment to be his disciples and apostles.

Rally Sunday and Renewal of the Covenant Sunday mark the beginning of a new year in the life of our church. Coincidentally, this is also the time of year when our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrate their new year through the renewal of their covenant relationship with God. With the frightening waves of anti-Semitism that have recently found freedom of expression by right-wing fascists in our nation and other nations, those who long for a Fourth Reich that will begin its ethnic cleansing once again with the Jews, this is a good time to remind ourselves of all we have in common with our brothers and sisters of the Jewish faith. At this time in history, we need to stand together in support of our Jewish brothers and sisters, our Muslim brothers and sisters, in the humbling realization that we have not always done so in the past.

This past Monday, our Jewish brothers and sisters celebrated Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah, also known as “The Day of the Sounding of the Ram’s Horn” or “Trumpets,” is the celebration of the Jewish New Year. Rosh Hashanah, which lasts two days, is celebrated in the autumn. This is when the summer drought comes to an end in Palestine and when the soil is plowed for the winter grain.

Several legends became associated with Rosh Hashanah through the millennia. It is believed to be the day on which Adam was created out of clay. It is celebrated as the birthday of

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the day Joseph was released from prison, and the day Moses demanded that Pharaoh let the Israelites go. Whether or not Rosh Hashanah is the actual day these events took place, it is obvious that the deep symbolism carried by each involves the theme of God's covenant and the themes of creation, renewal, and new beginnings.

The mood of Rosh Hashanah is different from that of our secular celebration of New Year. It marks the beginning of the Ten Days of Repentance, also called the Solemn Days, the High Holy Days, and the Fearful Days. The mood is serious and solemn. The sounding of the *shofar* or trumpet in the synagogues on Rosh Hashanah is to awaken those who have fallen asleep or drowsed in their fulfillment of their covenant. I like the symbolism of this part of the ceremony, for the theme of awakening is one that I find especially meaningful.

Rosh Hashanah is grounded in the belief that there is a Book of Life in heaven, and that our every thought, feeling, word, and deed are recorded in this book during the twelve months of the year. On Rosh Hashanah, when the Book of Life is opened, the life we lived in this past year is carefully examined. Our fate for the coming year is then written into the Book.

This belief is not unlike the Buddhist notion of karma. Karma is the realization that our actions have consequences that extend over time, perhaps over years, perhaps over all our life, perhaps even into the next life. I can buy that. Actions do have consequences. As I noted in a recent sermon on Essentialism vs. Existentialism, existentialists believe that we are neither essentially good and loving nor essentially bad and sinful. We are the life that we live; we are the choices that we make. What we have done in this past year is who we really are, and, unless we change our mind and our heart, it will shape who we will be in the year to come.

In addition to the trumpet and book, a symbol that is associated with Rosh Hashanah is a pair of scales. This is a reminder that our thoughts and our deeds are weighed and judged by God. We talked about this a few weeks ago when we asked which is more important--judgment or forgiveness, and we decided that Jesus would say "both."

Today, Renewal of the Covenant Sunday, let us think back over the year that has just passed. How faithful were we to our covenant with God, this church, each other, and the world? What is written in the Book of Life under our name?

This coming Wednesday, ten days after the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish brothers and sisters will observe Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur is known as the Day of Atonement.

The ninth day of the Ten Days of Repentance, the day before Yom Kippur, is a special day of preparation. At the synagogue, a long table is covered with plates. Every plate has a card on it designating the charitable organization it represents. During the afternoon service, the worshipers walk past the plates slowly, placing their contributions on some or all of the plates. They do this because of the Jewish belief that *tzedakah*, an act of charity, may save one from the punishment that one deserves based on the reading of that person's Book of Life.

We draw from this tradition every month when we make an offering to a mission that we support as a church. This month, our mission offering is given in support of Straight Ahead Ministries. When we give to help young men and women in the juvenile justice system find a new, Christ-centered life, we are engaging in *tzedakah*.

On the afternoon before Yom Kippur, either in the synagogue or at home, worshippers join in a meal. This meal must be finished, and the table must be cleaned before sunset. After sunset, everyone except children under thirteen, the elderly, and the sick will fast until sunset of the following day. This fast is undertaken to remind the faithful of the sacred dimension of this day, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. It also symbolizes the importance of sacrifice, the sacrifice of material pleasure, in our deepening spiritual journey.

At dusk on the day before Yom Kippur, men, women, and children gather in the synagogue. The *torahs* are taken out of the Holy Ark. The congregation rises. The cantor begins to chant the solemn and haunting *Kol Nidre* prayer. This prayer is chanted three times.

On the day of Yom Kippur, worship services begin early and last until evening. Several times during the day the congregation makes a confession of every possible kind of sin and wrongdoing, just in case any of the sins on the list has been committed unknowingly. This is an interesting ceremony from the point of view of depth psychology. It affirms that we are as responsible for sins that are committed unconsciously as we are for sins that are committed consciously. If I constantly criticize my child and then plead that I had no idea that to do so would have an adverse effect on my child's self-esteem, I am still responsible for the damage that I have inflicted on my child's psyche. The entire congregation participates in the list of confessions, and forgiveness is asked for the congregation as a whole.

Part of the Yom Kippur service is the *Yizkor*, or memorial prayer for the dead. *Yizkor* is recited for the departed on several Jewish holidays, including the last day of Passover. The soul being mourned is mentioned by name and the mourner pledges to give *tzedakah*, charity, as a

memorial tribute. You can see how important charity is to Jewish religious belief and worship. We observe this when we give to our Memorial Fund in memory of a loved one who has died.

This morning, I would like to present a slightly different emphasis from the focus on perfection that I find in our own Christian tradition. I have recently been reading and thinking about a spirituality of imperfection. From what I understand of this spiritual tradition, which has been a part of many religious traditions, including our own, it begins with the acceptance of ourselves as human beings. It involves an acceptance of our humanity, our imperfections.

The psychologist C. G. Jung says that perfection is one-sided and, as such, is psychologically unhealthy. Perfectionism is a tragic example of all-or-nothing thinking; we are either perfect or we fail. Jung tells us that the psyche moves toward wholeness, and that an important part of the process of individuation is acknowledging and integrating our shadow. To engage in this process of honest self-reflection brings a feeling of great humility, a humility that provides the ground on which we can grow to fullness of life as children of God.

This morning, I would like to share two little stories from our Christian tradition that help us understand the importance of the kind of genuine and healthy humility that comes out of an acceptance and affirmation of our humanity, our limitations, our finitude.

In the early centuries of the Christian church, some devoted Christians retreated into the desert to reclaim the simplicity of life that was already beginning to slip away from the institutional church. These monks became known as the Desert Fathers, and their writings provide us with profound insights into depth psychology and true Christian spirituality. The following is a story about Moses the Black, one of the most respected of the Desert Fathers.

A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go. Then the priest sent someone to say to him, "Come, for everyone is waiting for you." So, he got up and went, taking a leaking jug filled with water and carrying it with him. The other monks came out to meet him and said, "What is this, Father?" The old man replied: "My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the faults of another." When they heard that, they said no more to the brother but forgave him.

In another story from the tradition of the Desert Fathers, we read of Abba Bessarian.

A monk was brought up before the brotherhood for having committed a grievous sin, and it was decided that he would be excommunicated. As the monk left the sanctuary, his head bent in shame, the esteemed Abba Bessarian stood up, fell into step behind his fellow monk, and in a clear voice announced, "I, too am a sinner."

The spirituality of imperfection teaches us that we are deeply connected with our brothers and sisters through our faults, our flaws, our sins. As Evagrius Ponticus, another of the spiritual leaders of the desert monks, put it: “The nearer we draw to God, the more we should see ourselves as being one with every sinner.” This is the kind of true humility to which we are called as we renew our covenants with God and with each other.

On this special day in the life of our church, like our Jewish brothers and sisters we should pause and look back over the year that has passed. What has been written into the Book of Life under our name? Have we been true to our covenant with God, our church, each other, and those in special need throughout the world?

Like our Jewish brothers and sisters, we should begin the renewal of our covenant in an attitude of repentance. This is how we begin our communion services--with communal and individual prayers of confession. We identify those parts of ourselves that are weak and in need of strengthening, those parts of ourselves that are crooked and in need of straightening, those parts of ourselves that are sick and in need of healing. The goal is not to be perfect; the goal is to become conscious of our shadow in a way that humbles us. Then we open our hearts to receive God’s forgiveness, God’s grace, and God’s healing love, a forgiveness, grace, and love that we then extend to our brothers and sisters.

If we do this, we will enter into the new church year affirming a renewed covenant with God, our church, each other, and with life.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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October 6, 2019*