

## RENEWING OUR COVENANTS

(09/29/2024)

Scripture Lessons: Hebrews 8:8-12  
1 Corinthians 12:4-13, 27-31  
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.”* (Heb. 8:8,10)

*“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 our covenant, the promises, the vows we made on October 7, 1997, and which we still make to each other and to our church each year as pastor and parishioners. I can't believe this is our twenty-seventh 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, *really* knows them, doesn't just know their name. 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 every Sunday, we gather downstairs for what could probably be called a brunch. I know we are known as “the little church with a big heart,” and also as “the perfect church for imperfect people,” but a third guiding principle of our church is our pledge that 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 pass away, which has happened a lot over the past two decades. There are a lot of empty spaces in our sanctuary on Sunday mornings, spaces that we still associate with the loved one who sat there week after week, often decade after decade.

It also 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 our church like a family. It seems to me that at the heart of this is the richness, the binding power of covenant. A covenant relationship, if we enter into it deeply and faithfully, will shape us, will shape our soul.

This is certainly true of our relationship with our church. Over the past 159 years of our existence as a church, and specifically over the past twenty-seven years where we have walked the same path together, we have touched a lot of people's lives both inside and outside our church—for good. We are not the same people; we are not the same church we were twenty-seven years ago. I am certainly not the same person, the same pastor I was when I first came to this church. We have been through a lot together.

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 commitment to deepen our relationship with God, a relationship that changes both of us. Our covenant with God is an expression of our commitment to deepen this relationship and to place God in the center of our life. It is our response to Jesus' call to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength" as the first and greatest commandment.

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, Joseph, and Moses. In this covenant, God promises the nation of 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 or violate the covenant by worshipping 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, toward love rather than forgiveness. The father welcomes the son back with open arms. Even though the son did not behave responsibly, wasting his inheritance "in dissolute living," the father never stops loving him. The father offers his son what is articulated in the words of one of our beloved hymns: "the love that wilt 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 and growth in the context of a relationship that is or should be in the center of our lives. Let us rediscover the Spirit of God that is present within us and among us as a community of faith, and then be open to how God's indwelling presence can shape our church and turn our own 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 covenantal relationship. 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, its life and its mission.

People generally come to church because they want something, because 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, where they are inspired, enlightened, or challenged by the sermon. They want a church where they feel they belong, especially if they are a member of a minority group that has not been accepted, validated, respected, loved, and welcomed by other churches/synagogues/mosques/temples. They want a church that can provide their children with a healthy Christian education, one that reflects the teachings of Jesus.

The covenantal dimension of our church membership is a reminder that church membership is not just about receiving. When we became members, we made certain promises to our church. We promised to share what we have and who we are, the uniqueness of what we have and who we are with this church and, through this church, with the world. Paul tells us that each of us is a part, a member of the mystical body of Christ, and that each part of this 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 this morning, 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. This is true not only of the official members of our church, but also of all of you who are a part of our extended church family. 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 as co-creators with God of this world in which we find ourselves. As members of our extended church family, we covenant to share our gifts in response to the many needs of our church, our community, our nation, and the world.

The third dimension of the covenant we renewed this morning is our pledge to support each other as pastor and parishioners. Our covenant is an expression of our commitment to each other, our commitment to minister not only with, but also to each other. The litany in which we joined is not a job description for your pastor; 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 be patient, accepting, and quick to forgive real or imagined slights, real or imagined offenses. We need to care for each other. As I mentioned last week, we need to be gentle with 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 the covenant we renewed this morning 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 addressing the ongoing problem of food insecurity in our own community, and 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 and the people of Haiti, 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. When we baptize infants, children, or adults in this church, 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. Every 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 through the area for several days with no success. Finally, someone suggested that they join hands and walk through the fields near the child's house together. When they did this, they found the child's body.

When the news people interviewed the searchers following their discovery of the child's body, they heard the same sentiment expressed over and over: "I just wish we had joined hands earlier."

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Today, on Re-covenanting 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. God grant that through our faithfulness to these four precious covenants, our faith will be deepened, and our church will be empowered to offer its ministry of care, compassion, concern, and love, its ministry of light to a darkened and broken world in the year to come.

And we will be better able to do this if we join hands with Jesus and with each other.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
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September 29, 2024*

An audio version of this sermon will be posted on our church website later this week.