

A COVENANTING CHURCH

(10/03/2021)

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, Bob L’Heureux, our Deacon Emeritus, led us in a liturgy of the renewal of our covenant, the vows or promises that were exchanged 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-fourth 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 so 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! Following our worship service on Renewal of the Covenant Sunday, we traditionally gather downstairs for a pot-luck luncheon. Without going into detail about the casseroles our members bring, I assure you that we always have enough food! No one ever goes away from our church hungry! *I hope this is true spiritually, as well.*

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. There are several different meanings or understandings of the term covenant.

A covenant can be a formal agreement or treaty between two parties with each assuming some obligation. The Old Testament describes several such covenants, e.g., between Jacob and Laban. It can be between states of political units, e.g., the covenant between Abraham and the King of Gerar.

The covenant between God and Israel that was originally made with Abraham was codified at Mt. Sinai. This covenant was strictly defined, and the Israelites were punished if they broke it. The tablets of the covenant were stored in the Ark of the Covenant, which the Israelites took with them wherever they went. The covenant relationship also had a personal or familial dimension, e.g., the Israelites were called God’s children.

Jesus came to share a new covenant with us, a covenant that is beautifully expressed in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus’ disciples were described as members of the new covenant. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul writes,

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

I like that expression: we are “ministers of a new covenant.” Paul tells us that this new covenant is

written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

This covenant “written in our hearts,” the New Covenant revealed in Jesus, is the center of our spiritual formation, our spiritual growth, our spiritual journey.

As expressed in our liturgy this morning, there are four dimensions of the covenant. 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 life. As Christians, we covenant with that God who was revealed to us in Christ Jesus, and we enter a covenantal relationship with Jesus when we accept his invitation to become his disciples and apostles.

The second dimension of the covenant is our covenant with this church, this community of believers, this community of faith. As members and friends of this church, we vow 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 promise to do whatever we can to build, maintain, and strengthen the little community of faith that is this church.

The third dimension 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, to this church, and to the world.

The fourth dimension involves our mission outreach, our ministry outside ourselves, the many ways we reach out to those in need. We, as pastors and parishioners, are engaged in a mutual ministry—a ministry to each other and beyond. This focus also finds expression in how we bring our faith, how we bring 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 annually or 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 in September and Renewal of the Covenant Sunday in October 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 antisemitism 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, in support of our Muslim brothers and sisters, in the humbling realization that we have not always done so in the past.

Let me say just a word about the ways we have not always stood in opposition to the demonic forces of antisemitism and Islamophobia in ourselves, our society, our nation, and the world. Charles R. Gallagher, a Boston College historian, has recently released a sobering account of antisemitism entitled *Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front*. Apparently, it was common knowledge at the time that Nazi sympathizers walked the streets of Boston, held rallies in Hibernian Hall in Roxbury, where a Nazi propaganda film was screened, and that a Nazi spy operation was conducted out of a brick townhouse not far from the Bunker Hill Monument.

According to Gallagher's research into a part of our history that is not consonant with the image we have of ourselves as enlightened and progressive, not like those slave owners in the South or those Nazis over in Germany, an organization called the Christian Front, centered here in Boston, was a center of antisemitism. As I understand it, the founder of the Christian Front, Father Charles Edward Coughlin, had a syndicated radio program that spread Nazi propaganda and antisemitic hate in a way that led people to believe that these two ways of thinking were surprisingly congruent with the Christian faith. Of course, this makes me very sad.

Gallagher tells us that then-Governor James Michael Curley once referred to Boston as "the most Coughlinite city in America." Both Curley and Joseph P. Kennedy, both Nazi appeasers, were cozy with Coughlin. Even after we entered the war, gangs on Blue Hill Avenue, a center of Jewish life at the time, spewed antisemitic violence and threats of genocide, terrorizing the residents. Speakers at rallies that numbered in the thousands railed against Franklin D. Roosevelt and "those atheistic-Jewish communists," informing those in attendance that the president needed to be "removed from office by force and violence."

This is just to say that it is easier to see evil in others than in ourselves. It is easier to see and condemn slavery in the South, where it was built into the culture, social structure, and economic structure, than to acknowledge and condemn the deep heritage of slavery right here in Massachusetts. It is easier to see and condemn Nazism in Germany than to see it in our present-day political discourse. We need to become conscious of how descendants of the Christian Front, those “Christians” who have no problem reconciling the teachings of Jesus with slavery, antisemitism, and fascism, live among us—and perhaps even within us.

On September 7 this year, 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 always 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. We celebrate the New Year by getting drunk or by watching the ball descend in Times Square. When our family lived in Germany, we discovered that the new year was welcomed in by fireworks. In Judaism, Rosh Hashanah 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 symbolic 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.

It strikes me that 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; they shape who we are. 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 or perhaps even determine who we will be in the year to come. Unless we change our mind and our heart.

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. Even if we trust in God's forgiveness, there is a sense that forgiveness does not wipe the slate clean, only that we are loved despite our sin. Judgment, the kind of judgment that makes us conscious, that makes us aware of how our thoughts, words, and deeds have affected others, is an important part of our spiritual journey.

Today, on 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?

On September 16 this year, ten days after the celebration of Rosh Hashanah, our Jewish brothers and sisters observed 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 perhaps all 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, October, 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 we committed consciously. For example, 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 everyone. I guess they feel that it is quite unlikely that any of us has no conscious or unconscious sins for which we need to repent.

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 church's Memorial Fund in memory of a loved one who has died.

This morning, I would like to present a slightly different emphasis from the unfortunate focus on perfection that I find in our own Christian tradition. Throughout this pandemic, I have found myself reading and thinking about a spirituality not of perfection, but of imperfection. From what I understand of this spiritual tradition, a spirituality of imperfection, which is apparently 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, which means that we fail a lot! 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 are illustrative of a spirituality of imperfection, that might 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.

Perhaps we should think of this when we find ourselves angry or even enraged at our brothers and sisters who are not taking this coronavirus seriously, who have chosen not to receive the vaccine, whom we feel are not being respectful of others who may become infected, who are disdainful of science and vehemently oppose directives to make any kind of sacrifice for the common good, who do not share our political views, which are, of course, enlightened. And yes, I'm talking about myself here.

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 twisted and in need of straightening, those parts of ourselves that are broken and in need of mending, those parts of ourselves that are sick and in need of healing. The goal of our spiritual journey, our spiritual process is not to become perfect; the goal is to become conscious of our shadow in a way that humbles us and protects us from projecting it onto others and then judging them. When we do this, we open our hearts to receive God's forgiveness, God's grace, and God's healing love, a forgiveness, grace, and love that we can then extend to our brothers and sisters.

If we do this, we will enter 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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