

## CALLED AS PARTNERS IN CHRIST'S SERVICE

(10/01/2023)

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)*

*"He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits." (Mark 6:7)*

This morning we renewed our covenant, the promises we made on October 1, 1997, and still make to each other and to our church each year as pastor and parishioners. I can't believe that we have been together twenty-six years! And we're still friends . . . (I hope)!

There are four dimensions of the covenant we renewed this morning. The first is our covenant with God, the recognition and affirmation that we have a covenant relationship with God. We covenant to follow God's Word as we understand it in light of Jesus' life and teaching, to strive to deepen our relationship with God, and to place God in the center of our life.

The second dimension is our covenant with this church. When we became members of this church, we entered into a covenant relationship. We promised to support this 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 vowed to do whatever we could to build, maintain, and strengthen the little community of faith that, in its own way, is the mystical body of Christ, Christ's presence and hands in our little corner of the world.

The third dimension is the covenant relationship we have with each other as pastor and parishioners. We affirm the importance of our ministry to each other. The litany in which we joined this morning is not a job description of your pastor; it is an articulation of our mutual responsibilities. If we are faithful to this covenant; if we truly love each other despite our little idiosyncrasies; if we work together as a team, our church will grow into fullness of life as a Christian church.

The fourth dimension of our covenant involves our ministry outside ourselves, our commitment to share our faith in word and deed. An important part of who we are as a church is our mission outreach. It is an outward expression of our faith and an affirmation of our kinship with our brothers and sisters around the world, with children like Tenzin Norzin, the little Tibetan Buddhist girl whom we support through Tibet Aid. Tenzin, who is now seven years old, is studying at the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala, a sacred place that Corey and I

visited in our travels through northern India. Our mission outreach finds expression in the many ways we bring our faith, our values to bear on social situations, e.g., in the electoral process and the shaping of social policy.

Our closing hymn, which was written in 1981 by Jane Parker Huber, reminds us that we are,

*Called as partners in Christ's service,  
called to ministries of grace,  
We respond with deep commitment,  
fresh new lines of faith to trace.  
May we learn the art of sharing,  
side by side and friend with friend,  
Equal partners in our caring  
to fulfill God's chosen end.*

In this church, we are partners in our ministry to each other, to this church, and to the world.

Our closing hymn articulates the spirit of our worship on Re-Covenanting Sunday. There are various times in the year and in our lives when we renew and reaffirm the covenants we have made. If we think of marriage as a covenant relationship, we might renew our vows to our spouse on each anniversary or on a special anniversary of the day we were married. When a child is baptized, we invite those present to remember their own baptism and to reaffirm the covenant dimension of their relationship 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 commitment to grow in discipleship through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Rally Sunday and Re-Covenanting 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. I would like to say a few words about the Jewish celebration of New Year because I believe it speaks to the importance of our covenant relationship as well as theirs.

On Saturday, September 16, 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, when the summer drought comes to an end in Palestine and when the soil is plowed for the winter grain. There are several legends that became associated with Rosh Hashanah through the millennia. It is believed to be the day on which Adam was created out of clay; 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 Rosh Hashanah is the actual day these momentous events took place, which is doubtful, it is obvious that they all involve the themes of covenant and new beginnings.

The mood of Rosh Hashanah is different from that of our secular celebration of New Year or the beginning of our church year in September. It is not celebratory. 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 metaphor of awakening is one that I find meaningful.

Rosh Hashanah is grounded in the Jewish 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, our deeds are carefully examined. On the basis of our thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds in the past year, our fate for the coming year is written into the Book of Life.

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 many years, perhaps over all our life, perhaps even into the next life. We know that what we have done in the past year will shape what we will do, will shape our fate in the year (or years) to come—because what we have done has shaped us.

In addition to the trumpet and the book, another symbol that is associated with Rosh Hashanah is a pair of scales. This is a reminder that our deeds are weighed and judged by God. We explored this aspect of our relationship with God on Rally Sunday when we considered how often Jesus' teachings confront us with a *complexio oppositorum*, a complex of opposites. In response to the question of which is more important, justice or forgiveness, having us experience the consequences of our sin or having our sin removed from us, I think Jesus would say "both."

Today, on Re-Covenanting Sunday, as we begin another church year, 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 past Monday, September 25, 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 usually set up. This table is covered with plates that are called charity plates. Every plate has an identification 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.

On the afternoon before Yom Kippur, worshippers join in a meal, sometimes in the synagogue and sometimes in their homes. This meal must be finished and the table cleaned before sunset. After sunset, everyone except children under thirteen, the elderly, and the sick will fast until after 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, and the importance of sacrifice in our life and in our spiritual journey.

Before leaving home for the Kol Nidre service, which takes place immediately before sunset on Yom Kippur, the Kol Nidre prayer is said or chanted or sung: "Source of blessing, Eternal our God, You fill the universe with majestic might--giving us life, upholding the life within us, and bringing us to this time." At the Kol Nidre service the rabbi blesses the children. This custom dates back to the time of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The rabbi holds his/her hands over the heads of the children and says:

*May God make you as Ephraim and Manasseh. May it be the will of our Father in Heaven to plant in your heart love of Him. May you wish to study the Torah and its commandments. May your lips speak the truth, and your hands do good deeds. May you be inscribed for a long and happy life.*

This blessing is a call to new life. By the way, Ephraim, which means "fruitful place," was Joseph's younger son born in Egypt to Asenath. Ephraim was intentionally blessed by Jacob ahead of his brother Manasseh, portending the ascendancy of Ephraim's tribe. I find it confusing that Manasseh is also the name of a son of king Hezekiah. Manasseh, who became king of Judah and reigned longer than any other king of the house of David, was a terrible king! However, he did repent later in his life. Maybe his repentance is what is held up before the children.

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, the Day of Atonement, 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 mentioned has been committed unknowingly. This is a powerful teaching because it reminds us that while much of what we do is conscious, even more of what we do is unconscious. And, as Jung reminds us, we are responsible for both. 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 missions or give to our Memorial Fund in memory of a loved one who has died.

A story that illustrates the importance of confession and atonement on Yom Kippur tells of an angel whom God punished for wrongdoing. As a punishment and a teaching, God sent the angel to earth to bring back the most precious thing he could find there.

The angel returned with a drop of blood from a soldier dying for his country. He was told that this was indeed precious, but not the most precious of all the things on earth.

The angel, discouraged, returned to earth. This time he came back with the last breath of a heroic woman who had sacrificed her life for others. He was told that this was indeed more precious than the drop of blood, but it was still not the most precious thing in God's sight.

The angel returned to his quest. He flew back and forth over the earth despairing that he should ever be able to find that which is most precious to God. Suddenly something caught his eye. He swooped down just as a criminal was about to kill an innocent man.

At the very last moment, with his knife raised above his victim's heart, the criminal hesitated. He felt a wave of compassion for his victim. He felt himself filled with repentance for his anger and the harm it had caused to others throughout his life. He knew he could not follow through on his intended deed. In this precise moment, a single tear, a tear of repentance, rolled down his cheek. The angel scooped up the tear and brought it back to heaven.

God accepted the single tear of repentance as the most precious thing on earth. The angel was forgiven and was welcomed back into heaven.

Today, on Re-Covenanting Sunday, we celebrate the beginning of a new church year. Like our Jewish brothers and sisters, we should take this time to look back over the year that has

passed. We should take the time to reflect on 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?

As we enter into this new season in the life of our church, like our Jewish brothers and sisters, we should begin the New Year in an attitude of repentance. We should be conscious of 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 or broken and in need of healing. Then we should open our hearts to receive God's forgiveness, God's grace, and God's healing love.

If we do this, we will enter into the New Year both as pastor and parishioners affirming a renewed covenant with God, our church, each other, and with life.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
[www.firstcommunitychurch.com](http://www.firstcommunitychurch.com)  
October 1, 2023*

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

## **OUR RESPONSE TO THE WORD—A CALL TO STEWARDSHIP**

As we noted, part of the Yom Kippur service is the *Yizkor*, or memorial prayer for the dead. The person being mourned is mentioned by name, and the mourner pledges to give *tzedakah*, charity, as a memorial tribute to his/her loved one. The sign outside our church this morning, in observance of the Jewish celebration of Yom Kippur, reads "Practice Tzedakah!"

Tzedakah, charity, is given as a memorial tribute to our loved ones. In this church, we remember loved ones who have entered into what our Episcopal brothers and sisters call "the nearer presence of God" on the first Sunday in November, on All Souls and All Saints Sunday. During this service I read aloud the names of loved ones who were an important part of our lives, and we celebrate the important contribution that these persons have made to our personal and often our spiritual development.

As I often mention at the end of a funeral or memorial service, the most important way that we ensure that our loved ones live on in the world is when we take the parts of them that we most cherish, the parts of them that made their lives, their presence in the world so special, and

let these traits, these qualities of life live on within us. If we incarnate their admirable qualities, they will never die.

When we do this, we are being good stewards of the beautiful experiences, the beautiful parts of our loved ones that they entrusted to us. We share this with others, with the world, just as our Jewish brothers and sisters do when they practice tzedakah, acts of charity.

It is in this spirit that we share the gifts we have received from loved ones, the gifts we have received from God, the gifts we have received from Jesus, the gifts we have received from our church, and share these gifts with our families, with our church, with those who are a part of our daily lives, and with a world that desperately needs them.