

## Renew the Covenant

sermon digest

Covenant Thanksgiving Sunday

November 23, 2014

Hebrews 10:16-25

larry dipboye

Our name *Grace Covenant Church* reflects the shared promises of faith that form our worship today and frame our commitment to God and our promises to one another. From our beginning, we chose to focus our commitment in a covenant expressing our faith, our mission, and our core values. Grace Covenant was designed, discussed, and finally decided by our congregation more than ten years ago and continues to form the center of our life together. At the beginning, we agreed to renew our commitment to God and to one another every year. To be real, a covenant must always be alive and new.

We did not, however, invent the idea of covenant. The major divisions of our Bible, Old and New Testaments, originated as “covenants,” old and new. The covenant between God and Israel is mentioned no less than 286 times in the Old Testament, but never in the plural. The language changed with the times, but the Covenant was always one commitment to the one God who had promised life to the people. In the earliest pages of the Bible, covenant was the word that described the promise of God toward the creation. Covenant described the bond between God and Israel. The Jews looked to the example of Father Abraham as the model of commitment to God. The covenant continued in Moses and David. Through the ages, Jewish and Christian congregations kept the covenant alive through renewal. The time would come in the life of every child of God and every generation to covenant with God.

When the English Puritans made their way to the Colonies in search of a new life in a new land, they recognized that baptism does not guarantee a Christian life of obedience and commitment to Christ. Early Congregationalists would not baptize the child of someone who was not “in covenant with the church,” counted among the visible saints. An experience of grace confirming a living covenant relationship with God was necessary for full membership in the church, admission to Communion, and the right to vote in congregational meetings. In 1662, when non-saints wanted their children to be baptized, a conference of clergy decided to compromise with a “Half-way Covenant” that allowed baptism for children of people who were nominal Christians. The compromise of faith in the Half-Way Covenant became a primary motive for the early revivals in America. “The Great Awakening” was a wake-up call to renew the covenant commitment to God.

The language common in the life of the church today “inactive church member” is an oxymoron. Church membership is not about a piece of paper in a file drawer or a picture in a church directory. Just like marriage and family, our tie to the church is bound by a living covenant.

The writer of Hebrews recalled the vision of Jeremiah 31:31 for the day when the Covenant would no longer be about the flawed languages of contracts and laws. Covenant is always more than words on paper, or in the language of Paul “words chiseled in stone.” Even as we renew our commitment today that focuses on a statement of faith and life, our Covenant is really written on the heart. Our bond with God and one another is ultimately anchored in God’s grace toward us and our love for one another.

## Keep the Promise

carolyn dipboye

“Christians, alas, are not famous for encouraging one another,” the late Harvard Divinity School professor and chaplain Peter Gomes once observed. Sometimes even the phrase “Christian love” has something of an unintended sense of irony about it, and the historic words proclaiming “see how these Christians love one another” are often used to rebuke Christians for their lack of love and encouragement. With some humor, Gomes recalls an old story. The Baptists and the Methodists, located on street corners just opposite each other, were singing their hearts out. The Methodists sang the great gospel question, “Will There Be Any Stars in My Crown?” to which the Baptists sang as if in reply, “No, Not One.” Censure, competition, rebuke and self-righteousness, Gomes sadly concludes, far too often define our relationship with one another in Christ’s Church [*Christian Century*, November 5, 1997].

And it is not as if this were anything new. When we deal in human relationships, we deal with the imperfect, the often frustrating and disappointing. The writer of Hebrews wrestled with a church demoralized by apostasy, division and competition, cultural rejection and persecution. While we often turn his words into a doctrinal treatise, his words, his relationship to the community are more personal than that. His words rather constitute sermon of encouragement in the face of despair. Recalling the action of God in the past and the promises of God into the future, Preacher, as Thomas Long calls him, issues a great “therefore”—or perhaps, given the difficulties of the situation, a great “nevertheless”—and calls the small, beleaguered community to hope. More than pie-in-the-sky, his is a hope for the here and now. Grounded in the faithfulness of the one who called them into being, it is about their shared baptism and the critical importance of their faithfulness to God *and* one another. It is about church discipline, but a church discipline different from the negative, condemning approach we have seen too often. It is about giving ourselves to the day-to-day fellowship, the day-to-day caring for each

other, the day-to-day work of Christ's body. In Preacher's own words, it is about holding fast and choosing hope in the face of despair. It is about stirring one another toward ever deepening love and good works. It is about the seemingly mundane—the regular gathering to one another and not neglecting to meet together, as apparently has been “the habit of some.” It is not about hounding each other, degrading each other, judging one another, but encouraging one another, enabling our brother, our sister, our shared community to be more than and do more than any of us could be or do alone.

We say as much in our own Covenant: “We will be priests to one another, ordained by our baptism to the work of a caring ministry.” Together we acknowledge that we all are ordained. We all are called. More than an insignificant blip, our baptism is the point from which we live and move and have our being. It defines us both in our relationship to God and to one another and in our relationship with the world in which we live. It is about how we define “success.” More than giving evidence to the external measures of numbers, wealth and prestige by which others measure, it is about faithfulness to markers we have laid down for ourselves. It is about caring ministry to one another, responsible discipleship, integrity of life and faith, reconciliation in conflict, the ministry of peace and justice, joining hands with other people of faith and all people of good will, and casting our vision “to the ends of the earth in celebration of the universal presence, love, and revelation of God to the whole human family.”

It is, Thomas Long suggests, about “serving as midwives of the future of God;” and he tells a story. Garret Keizer, lay minister to a small Episcopal church in Vermont, recalls a Saturday night Easter vigil at which only he and two others were present. Lighting the Paschal candle in anticipation of the coming Easter dawn, he was struck by the seeming incongruity of the situation:

The candle sputters in the half darkness, like a voice too embarrassed or overwhelmed to proclaim the news: “Christ is risen.” But it catches fire, and there we are, three people and a flickering light. . . . The moment is filled with the ambiguities of all such quiet observances among few people, in the midst of an oblivious population in a radically secular age. The act is so ambiguous because its terms are so extreme; the Lord is with us, or we are pathetic fools [in *Interpretation: Hebrews*, 107].

So hear today the good news: We covenant together in the presence of the God of hope, daring to believe that who we are to one another and who we are to and within our world matter and matter greatly. “Believing that we have been called of God to gather this community of grace, we are,” we affirm, “members of this body of Christ by the bond of covenant—our solemn commitment to God and to one another”

So may it be. And so may we live.