

## Pentecost XXI

*The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.* Jeremiah 31:32 -34

Covenant is a vital and somewhat mysterious concept in the Hebrew Scriptures. God makes covenants with humankind on a number of occasions; there's the well-known one after the Flood, when God promises never again to try to destroy the peoples of the earth. And there's the one with Abraham, when God designates Abraham and his descendents as the Chosen People and promises that will inherit the earth – or, at least, the Promised Land.

God renews God's promises over time. Or, to put it another way, God reminds the Chosen People of God's own faithfulness and the people's faithlessness, and calls them back into covenant and right relationship. A covenant is a special kind of relationship in which parties pledge themselves to one another. Covenants in Hebrew Scripture generally have two parts; a promissory oath and the contents or stipulations of the promise. The stipulations could be spelled out in lists of laws and even books of laws defining how covenant people should behave.

The people—or the people's prophets, regard all of these covenants as occurring at critical moments in the life of the community. In times of change or transition, when doubt and anxiety were pervasive, it was time for a covenant or the renewal of the old covenant. Every covenant was initiated by God, or so it was thought, and called for a response from the people. All the covenants involved promise

*The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them.'*

Here are those elements I've been describing. God is going to *initiate* a *new* covenant with the *Chosen People* (the House of Israel and the House of Judah) The promise of the new covenant reported by Jeremiah contains one of the most ancient and persistent formulations of the covenant vows Yahweh makes to Israel: *I will be their God and they shall be my people.* This simple sentence contains everything that books of laws might enumerate. All the people have to do to make a covenant is to say, *We will be*

*God's people.*

The language in this passage from Jeremiah is particularly intimate. Jeremiah has God speaking in the language of marriage, of family. In recalling the old broken promise the prophet hears God saying, *I took them by the hand*, the way a mother leads her children. *I was their husband*, God says. (Do we need any further proof that God is neither male nor female, or is both? And more? ) God has always been as close as flesh and blood to God's own people. And now, with the new covenant of the heart, a way is prepared for an even deeper level of intimacy.

And what is the real novelty of the new covenant? In past covenants, as I've said, God initiates, forgives sins (remember the covenant with Noah) and suggests that Israel will know God more fully. What is without precedent is that the law is now written on the heart, in the core of one's being. God promises to change people – to change us– from the inside out. We will be given a new center, a heart of love and faithfulness.

And what are the implications of this bold promise? The idea is that we will act as if we are God's – as if we are owned by God- without having to think about it. We will not face conflicts between what we want to do and what we ought to do, or between what we want and what God wants. We will act instinctively out of love and faithfulness, because those attributes are written on our hearts.

A tall order, isn't it? Do any of us believe we fulfill our part of the covenant? Do we never experience the struggle between the desires of our hearts and what we know or imagine God's heart's desire to be? Do any of us believe that we act instinctively out of love and faithfulness, every time?

One thing I have not mentioned about covenants far– and perhaps the most important thing, and the most difficult for us to grasp here, today, in 2007, is that the making of a covenant with God was not an individual act but a communal one. The making of a covenant, and the keeping or breaking of it was, and is, the work of a community of faith. When Israel made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai, when they received the stipulations on those tablets that we know as the Ten Commandments, they didn't sign on as individuals. They signed on as a community, and thus constituted themselves as a people. They bound themselves not only to God but also to one another.

To me, that understanding of covenant as a community venture, a community commitment, makes it both easier and more difficult to contemplate fulfilling. Is it harder to hold oneself to a high standard of behavior, or to hold the community to that standard? Can individuals behave better than communities, or, in communities of faith, does the whole transcend the sum of the parts? Do some especially saintly people carry the rest of us with them?

I don't think there's a clear answer to this. If I have as my life's goal to be the best person possible: the most selfless, the most generous, the kindest person I can be, I may do pretty well. Or, I may not. And most of us can't concentrate on moral perfection all the time: we have to work, we have to make families and raise them, we have to immerse our broken selves in a broken world where our personal moral goals are inevitably compromised by reality.

On the other hand, living in community is messy business. We don't agree; we have power struggles, we have conflicting priorities and often conflicting views of right and wrong, and we seem destined as broken people to hurt and anger one another. At the same time, if we are to stay in community we have to learn to compromise, and while compromise may distract us at times from our pursuit of moral purity, it humbles us through sacrifice and leads us in the direction of that selflessness I mentioned a moment ago.

There may not be a clear answer to the question, which is more difficult – individual or communal commitment to love and faithfulness. But there is a Christian answer, or rather, the Christian answer is that there is no choice to make. Our promise, our commitment, our covenant, is not individual, nor is God's. We make our pledge to God as a community, and God's promise is the same. God does not – and this is where much of evangelical Christianity gets it wrong, really wrong – God does not promise us individual salvation, nor does Jesus.

God and Jesus have no interest in individual salvation. Indeed, they don't even have the *concept*. God and Jesus have their eye on the community: community faith, community practice, community covenant. That's one of the reasons Jesus takes so lightly the charge that he is hanging around with sinners. His concern is really not on what the sinner has done, but how the community treats its members.

And so, back to the quest for loving and faithful behavior. All of us as individuals are bound to stumble and fall down on the path to moral perfection. And as a community we are bound to fall short as well. But as a community, as God's people bound together in holy covenant, we can pick each other up and carry one another along. We can hold ourselves to a communal higher standard and, combining the strengths and gifts and vision of each and all of us, move together toward that goal of knowing and binding ourselves to the heart of God.

We have a great deal going on here at St. John's this fall. Last week we baptized Anna Joy Mankhe, and blessed many animals, and in a few moments we will commission our faithful and creative Church School Teachers and give prayerbooks and bibles to some of their students. Next week we will celebrate our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a special event on Sunday afternoon and a visit from Bishop Tom Shaw, and on November 11 we will receive Bishop Bud Cederholm on Sunday morning. The most outward and visible sign of our growth and progress is the work going on to renovate our basement, and the vestry voted, prayerfully and faithfully last week to add another room to that project – the so called Mural Room, aka Middle Earth.

Moreover, this fall marks 15 years for me here at St. John's, causing me to reflect on the parish as I have known it over the years. And also, we are moving into our annual stewardship season, when we are *all* asked to reflect upon what our community means to us and to reflect that meaning in generous, even sacrificial giving.

One of the things community means to me is that the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts. A community always does contain a few especially saintly people who carry the rest of us forward, who lift the rest of upward, and, if we are truly living together in Christ, we learn from their holy example. Living together in community we learn how to act more lovingly, how to give more generously, how to treat one another as if we are meeting Christ, how to receive those who come to us with hospitality.

All of us have chosen this particular community in which to live out our covenant with God, in which to say, *We will be God's people*, in which to learn more deeply in our hearts what that pledge and promise means. Let this be a time of prayer and reflection for us all as we renew that promise of love and faithfulness – to ourselves, to one another, and to the God who has written on our hearts.

Alleluia! Amen.