

Finding a Place to Belong: Checking our Commitments
Jeremiah 31:31-34
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Today we begin a new sermon series called “Finding a Place to Belong.” Today’s topic is Checking our Commitments. Today is also the first day we worship together in the new year. Happy 2008! As United Methodists, we believe this is the time and the place to re-commit our lives to God, by focusing on what it means to be in covenant: covenant with one another, covenant with the Church and covenant with God.

I believe the word covenant is actually a verb. It requires action on our part. God has already given us a promise. God made a covenant with us long before we were born, long before we were created. And that covenant holds true today. In Jeremiah, scripture from long, long ago (500 years before Jesus was born), the prophet tells us God is prepared to make a brand-new covenant ... and that God is going to write this covenant on our hearts.

Through the covenant that God has made with us, we belong to God. We belong to God’s people. We belong to the kingdom. We belong. That’s been promised to us and given to us. Well, then it’s all fairly easy, isn’t it, because it seems as if God does most of the work.

But, belonging to God requires a commitment on our part. Ohhhh, now that’s more difficult. Ummm...that takes a little bit more time on my part ... takes a little bit more of an investment. Am I willing to hold up my end of the covenant, my end of the promise, my end of the relationship? Am I willing to hold up my end of the deal? Am I willing to live with this on my heart?

Let’s try and understand what God does for us before we make a commitment, shall we? It seems we’re just conditioned to think that way? “What’s in it for me? What do I get out of it?” I live with children ... teenagers. I deal with this on a daily basis. “If I shovel

the driveway,” says one, “what’s in it for me?” “If I empty the dishwasher,” says the other, “what do I get out of it?” It seems we’re conditioned to always figure out the personal benefits.

What does God do for us and why should we commit?

It might help if we define “covenant.” Lots of people lump the idea of covenant in with the idea of contracts. In reality the two ideas, while related and similar, are still very different, especially when it comes to the kind of relationship they each envision. In a contract, the underlying principle is individualistic. You make a contract with someone else so that you will benefit. You form a contract out of such questions as: “What’s in it for me?” Most importantly: “How can I get out of it?” Contracts have exit clauses. A contract can be broken.

A covenant is different. A covenant creates a new state of relationship. A covenant is about our willingness to enter fully into a relationship with someone else. It’s not self-centered; it’s other-centered. A covenant includes promises. We make vows. That’s why a marriage is a covenant and not a contract. We don’t enter into marriage for our own benefit; we’re also there for our partner. It’s the same with church membership – it’s a covenant – we don’t enter into it solely for our own benefit; we’re also there for the community. You might say a contract is about convenience whereas a covenant is about commitment.

This new covenant – that Jeremiah speaks of and that we entertain in the Church – is a promise ... a promise from God to forgive our sins and to put God’s law (God’s word, God’s grace) on our hearts, and to be our God and make us God’s people.

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 holds the classic covenant formula. I will be your God and you will be my people. What this means biblically is, observing the covenant is not an option. All of God’s people are expected to serve God.

Yeah, but what's in it for me?

God writes this covenant on our hearts, not IN our hearts, but ON our hearts. In the Hasidic tradition of Orthodox Judaism there's a story of a rabbi who always told his people that if they studied the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), it would put scripture on their hearts. One of them asked, "Why on our hearts, and not in them?" The rabbi answered, "Only God can put scripture inside. But reading sacred text can put it on your hearts, and then when your hearts break, the holy words will fall inside."

God writes the covenant ON our hearts, so that when we're overcome with disappointment, loneliness, rejection, disaster, desperation, and our hearts are broken, God's grace, and I believe God's presence, will fall inside. That's the promise.

Included in God's covenant is something pretty amazing, pretty unbelievable: God will wipe the slate clean ... erase the chalkboard ... delete the file ... close the chapter. God says, I will forgive and **not remember** your sin any more. In other words, our only hope lies in God's forgetfulness.

God will go to great lengths to restore a covenant relationship with us. There is no mention of Jesus in Jeremiah because Jesus has yet to appear on the scene. But we do realize, I hope, as Christians that in Jesus we again witness the same God at work again in history, revealing a God who is not willing to let us fall, who is not willing to let us die, who is not willing to let us go, but is again (and again and again and again) offering reconciliation. It is through Jesus that we know how far God will go to make sure that we understand that forgiveness and grace are available to you and to me.

And how do we respond to God's covenant? Well, some days I don't respond very well. Sometimes I forget. I rebel. I close my eyes and my ears and open my mouth way too much. And yet, God keeps inviting me back. God keeps placing faith role models in my path. God keeps lighting my world. God keeps on keepin' on. I hope that's as humbling for you as it is for me. God keeps loving me and saving me and offering me new life

each and every day. God keeps loving you and saving you and offering you new life each and every day. That's what's in it for you and me. That's why a commitment to a life of faith and to the covenant is so important and so life-giving.

In 1747, John Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement, urged "the people called Methodist" to begin each new year by renewing their covenant with God. For that purpose, he wrote a very meaningful Covenant Service. You will find a contemporary Wesleyan Covenant Service in your bulletin.

Though this will be our own personal covenant with God, we covenant together as a faith community. When we have completed the community covenant prayer, you are invited to sign it and keep it. I suggest you hang it in a place where you might see it every day: by your bathroom mirror, in the cupboard where you keep the coffee, in the top desk drawer in your office, or next to your computer. Place it in your Bible or with your daily devotional. Attach it to your calendar. Type it in your blackberry. Carry it in your purse or fold it up and put it your wallet. Whatever you do, wherever you put it, make sure that you write it on your heart. Make a commitment to live daily with God's covenant of blessings and grace.

INVITATION

Commit yourselves to follow Jesus Christ. Give yourselves to him, that you may belong to him. Jesus has many services to be done. Some are more easy and honorable; others are more difficult and bring disgrace. Some are suitable to our interests, others are not. In some we please Christ and ourselves. But then there are other works where we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. It is necessary to consider what it means to be a servant of Jesus.

First, set apart some time on a regular basis to be alone with the Lord. Seek God's assistance and acceptance of you. Search your heart to see if you are willing to give your life freely to Christ. Consider what your sins are and offer them to God.

Second, be serious and in a spirit of holy awe and reverence. Commit to participation in regular worship.

Third, claim God's covenant, rely upon God's promise of giving grace and strength. Trust God for your whole life, do not place your hope in your own strength and power. Fourth, resolve to be faithful. Give yourself to the Lord in everything you do. And last, come now to renew your covenant with the Lord. Open your hearts to the Lord as we pray:

SILENT PRAYER

COVENANT PRAYER

O God, I make this covenant with you today without reservation. Assign me to my place in your creation. Let me suffer for you. Give me the work you would have me do. Give me many tasks, or have me step aside while you call others. Put me forward or humble me. Give me riches or let me live in poverty. I freely give all that I am and all that I have to you. And now, Holy God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. May this covenant made on earth continue for all eternity. Amen.

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