

The Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

In the business world relationships are frequently defined and governed by contracts. Typically, contracts reward successes and provide penalties for failures of the parties to the contract. Contracts can be formal or informal. Contracts can be broken if one party fails to live up to the stated intentions of the written or unwritten document.

Informal contracts permeate virtually every part of our lives. Take my doctor, for instance. If I fail to come to an appointment I have made, he simply moves on to the next patient and bills me as if I had shown up at the appointed time. He has no further obligation toward me. His scheduling nurse, however, will probably put a note in my file that reminds her that I failed to make my appointment. The next time I need to see the doctor, it just might be harder to get an appointment. This is the penalty I suffer for failing to live up to the intent of our informal contract.

A covenant, on the other hand, is different than a contract. From a biblical perspective, a covenant is more like the relationship between a parent and her child than it is an appointment with my doctor. If a child fails to show up for dinner, the parent's obligation, unlike my doctor's, isn't canceled. The parent seeks out the child and makes sure he or she is brought back into the care of the parent. One member's failure does not destroy the relationship.¹

A covenant puts no conditions on faithfulness. It is the unconditional commitment to love and serve. It is for this reason God established a new covenant with Israel – not a contract. It is for this same reason God established a new covenant with us through the self-sacrificing love of Jesus Christ. Please pray with me.

Gracious and loving God, we are grateful that you have chosen to make covenant with us, to remind us that you are our God and that we are your children. Help us this morning to be open to the scripture read and your word proclaimed, to graciously and humbly accept your most generous offer of grace and your abounding love in Christ Jesus. Through Christ we pray. Amen.

The Old Testament reading this morning is from Jeremiah. God is speaking to Jeremiah about covenant. "The day is coming," says the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah." [Jeremiah 31:31 *NLT*] In the past week I have given much time to studying the covenant between our two congregations. I believe it is not a coincidence this passage on the new covenant turns up in the lectionary this week. In fact, I feel strongly that God is speaking to us today through the prophet Jeremiah.

God explains to Jeremiah that the problem with the old covenant is that the

¹ *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (copyright © 1993 by Christianity Today, Inc.), page 44.

Israelites could not find it in their hearts to be obedient to God's expectations. The old covenant had to be a part of the Israelite's oral tradition. It had to be learned, handed down and taught from generation to generation. And you know what happens with teachings that are spread by "word of mouth."

Have you ever played what I call the "gossip" game? Several people gather in a large circle. The leader whispers a phrase in her neighbor's ear and he passes it on to his neighbor. The progression continues on around the circle. When the progression of whispers makes it back to the leader, the ending phrase is usually much different from the original one. This phenomenon is a part of oral tradition. And oral tradition was fundamental to the Israelites in the days before words were written down.

It's true that God had the foresight to have Moses chisel the laws into granite tablets. But biblical history shows that the tablets ended up as religious artifacts, enshrined in the Ark of the Covenant, and were eventually forgotten and even lost. If Moses had a Xerox machine, perhaps the Ten Commandments could have been magnetized to the refrigerators of the Israelites to remind them of the need to be obedient. But Moses had no copy machine and, come to think of it, the Israelites didn't have refrigerators. A fundamental flaw in those early covenants between God the children of God.

God continues to explain to Jeremiah the nature of this new covenant. "... this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel on that day," says the LORD. "I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their

God, and they will be my people. And they will not need to teach their neighbors, nor will they need to teach their relatives, saying, 'You should know the LORD.' For everyone, from the least to the greatest, will know me already," says the LORD. "And I will forgive their wickedness, and I will never again remember their sins." [Jeremiah 31:33-34 *NLT*]

Since becoming your pastor, one focus of my ministry has been the covenant between our two churches and moving toward a constitution. Now that focus has been redirected by others back to the covenant and the need to amend it. I mean no disrespect for the authors of covenant. I am convinced they were sincere and true to their task. As I meditated on God's words to Jeremiah I had the feeling that the covenant expresses the will of the people more so than God's plan those people.

The covenant should be written on our hearts as much or more so than reduced to ink on paper. The covenant should reflect God's plan and expectations for this congregation. It should reflect God's expectations for our ministry together. As I read the covenant in the light of God's words to Jeremiah, it seems to define our ministry which actually is limiting. How should we define ministry? The best definition I have ever seen simply talks about the measures of ministry. It comes from a book entitled *Making Sense of Ministry*.²

The foundation of ministry is character.

The nature of ministry is service.

The motive of ministry is love.

² *Making Sense of Ministry*, Warren W. Wiersbe and David W. Wiersbe (Moody Press, 1983)

The measure of ministry is sacrifice.
The authority of ministry is submission.
The purpose of ministry is the glory of God.
The tools of ministry are the Word of God and prayer.
The privilege of ministry is growth.
The power of ministry is the Holy Spirit.
The model for ministry is Jesus Christ.

Character, service, love, sacrifice, submission, the glory of God, growth, the Holy Spirit, and Jesus Christ – these define ministry. Our covenant, that covenant we will ask God to write on our hearts must keep these measures of ministry in mind. The United Church of Christ reminds us that “God is still speaking.” I see that phrase on its website and every time I drive by St. Michael’s here in West Chicago. As we move forward we need to remember that our covenant is not just between the First Congregational Church and the First United Methodist Church. God is an equal partner in our cooperative ministry.

We need to remind ourselves that we are two churches with a single-mindedness to become one congregation in the body of Christ. Our common goal is to cooperate in honoring and glorifying God by becoming two hearts beating as one; two bodies intertwined as one. In honoring and glorifying God we seek to be two who are seamless and indistinguishable one from another. During this week I came across a quote by archeologist Howard Winters that

express this sentiment in terms of modern society.

Civilization is the process in which one gradually increases the number of people included in the terms “we” and “us” and at the same time decreases those labeled “you” or “them” until that category has no one left in it.

Although the coming together of our two churches will not look like we originally intended, we still have an opportunity to do something wonderful here in West Chicago and our neighboring communities of Winfield and Warrenville. We still have an opportunity to do something wonderful that will honor and glorify God.

For those of us who are disappointed we need to remember that God *is* still speaking. For those of us who are angry we need to focus on what is best for our congregation. For those of us who are optimistic we need to allow God to write this covenant on our hearts. And finally, for those of us who are pessimistic, we need to not let the limiting nature of denominational structure deter us from realizing the dream of becoming two hearts beating as one. Let God write his plan for us on our hearts and not worry about what is written on paper.