



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“A COVENANT COMMUNITY”

Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ephesians 2:11-22

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, January 24, 2010.

Paradox This morning I wish to discuss with you the importance of a concept which, historically speaking, has been a central part of the belief and practice of Presbyterians throughout the generations. It is a concept with which most people today are only vaguely familiar, if they are familiar at all. That concept is that the church is a covenant community. I cannot over state the meaning and the significance of being a covenant community. As a matter of fact, apart from a knowledge and understanding of covenant, you really cannot fully understand the message or the theology of the Bible, nor can you grasp the nature of God and of man, as covenant makers and keepers. In former times, when Christians were more theologically astute, they could discuss and debate the meaning of covenant and how it shapes our faith and our practice. And if we Presbyterians lose this perspective we are likely to lose one of our primary and historic distinctive as a denomination.

If a community is large enough to have several Presbyterian churches, it is highly likely that at least one of them will be named Covenant Presbyterian Church. Only the names First, Westminster & Trinity are more common among American Presbyterians. Seldom do you find a church in another denomination named Covenant. But for us it is a distinguishing and cherished doctrine.

Christian theology within the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition is often called Covenant Theology or Covenantal Theology. It arose in the sixteenth century. It came to fruition in English Puritanism and it is closely identified with a central creed of Presbyterians, the Westminster Confession of Faith. Understanding the nature of Covenant gives us a systematic way of appropriating the message of scripture. The two parts of the Bible are even called the Old Testament (or Old Covenant) and the New Testament (or New Covenant).

When Jesus tries to explain the significance of his death to the disciples he turns to the doctrine of the covenant. He explains the cup of the Lord's Supper as “the new covenant in my blood.” He understood his own messianic work as a fulfillment of God's covenant. Baptism in the New Testament, like circumcision in the old, is a sign and a seal of our covenantal relationship to God and to God's people. It marks our entrance into this community, even if we are only a child. The child in a baptismal service is addressed as “a child of the Covenant”. Later this child, when reaching the age of discretion, will have to confirm for herself or himself the promises made by parents on the child's behalf. And each person who remains a part of the covenant community will be given an opportunity to accept and receive God's promises and make promises in return.

So then, what is a covenant and why does it matter? If you memorized the Child's Catechism, as many of us did fifty or more years ago, then you may still remember the answer to question #22: “What is a covenant?” And the answer is: “A covenant is an agreement between two or more persons.”

Now, the persons who enter into covenants may not be equal partners. One party may impose the covenant upon the other, who is free to accept it or reject it, but not to amend the conditions set

forth. But at any rate a covenant, be it a covenant with God or a covenant with others, always contains promises that are given and received by both parties. It also usually gives warnings and spells out penalties or consequences for violating the covenant agreement.

Surely you must understand that we participate in covenants all the time outside our faith community. If you go to the bank to borrow money, then you as the borrower and the bank as the lender will sign papers in which you make certain promises. Since the bank has the money, it establishes the conditions of the covenant. If you agree to abide by the covenant and then break it there are built in penalties or consequences. You may live within a neighborhood that has certain covenant restrictions that determine what you can and cannot do even with your own property. So you see there are all kinds of covenants that condition our life together.

Likewise, according to covenantal theology and according to scripture, God entered into a covenant with Adam. It was called the covenant of works and Adam was represented all of mankind. Adam's very name means mankind. This covenant also had certain requirements, promises and warnings. It required absolute obedience on man's part and if the conditions were met, God promised to grant eternal life. Adam failed to keep the terms of the covenant and thus he and his descendents have had to bear the consequences of the fall. The Hebrew Scriptures tell the whole sordid history. Subsequently God entered into a covenant with one person and his descendents forever, Abraham. Their charge was to become a blessing to all the families of the earth, but they struggled to be faithful to that and eventually failed.

Genesis relates how the consequences of the fall spread like ripples in a pond and the creation and its creatures experienced distortion and alienation. First Adam and Eve were alienated from God, hiding in the garden. Then they are alienated from each other and engage in the blame game. Soon their sons are alienated and brother kills brother. By the time we get to the Tower of Babel nations are at odds with each other and with confused languages they can no longer even communicate. The whole of creation is distorted. Creatures are alienated from their Maker and their neighbor and reconciliation is desperately needed.

After Abraham God enters into the Mosaic Covenant with its conditions and with the law spelled out as to how God's people were to live. But God's sinful creatures proved incapable of keeping the law or of reaching out and drawing other families into God's covenant community.

Eventually the prophet Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant that God would establish that would depend not upon sinful man, but upon the mercy of God alone. This new covenant would be called a covenant of grace and in it God allows his own son, Jesus Christ to become what Paul called the second Adam, the second representative of humankind. Jesus, unlike Adam, seeks and accomplishes the Father's will and God the Father agrees to grant forgiveness and eternal life in consideration of Christ's perfect obedience and his sacrificial death.

But the new covenant, or the New Testament, is dramatically different from the old even though it grows out of it. The new covenant is internal rather than external. It is spiritual rather than legalistic. It depends on God's grace and God's faithfulness rather than on the faithfulness of mortal men and women. We are not saved by doing something for ourselves but by accepting through faith what God has done on our behalf in Christ. And this is intended to lead to a truer and surer knowledge of God and of God's love. Because of Jesus we Gentiles are finally brought into the covenant community and are no longer "strangers to the covenant", as Paul mentions in our morning lesson. We are now among those families that are blessed by God's covenant love. We who were once "far off" have been "brought near by the blood of Christ."

Now some people wrongly assume that since we are living under grace and not the law and since we are under a new covenant, then nothing is required of us as God's people. We are only the beneficiaries of God's covenant and there are no obligations on our behalf. Nothing could be farther from the truth. And this is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer labeled as "cheap grace". The moral law still applies to us. We continue to have obligations and duties, the difference being we do these things not in order to be saved but in gratitude for having been saved. Our obedience is our response to God's mercy and grace which we did not deserve.

As covenant people we are defined by the promises we make and receive. It is our covenant promises claimed and kept that shape our character, determine our lifestyle, form our values, and give identity to us as a covenant community.

We would all be well advised to recognize and honor the promises that we have genuinely received and fervently endeavored to keep. If we did so we would better understand who we are and what we are. It is these commitments and obligations that bind us to God and to one another.

On August 23, 1949 I entered into a covenant with God and with you. O, I know, you were not physically present at First Presbyterian Church in Canton Mississippi on that date when my parents presented me for baptism, but spiritually you were certainly there as a member of Christ's church. When we make promises as baptism we are representing the whole church past present and future in every place and circumstance. At my baptism my parents promised that they would teach me the Christian faith, that they would pray with and for me, and that they would bring me up in the life and worship of the church. Thank God they kept those sacred vows and though I was only a passive beneficiary of their promises, they helped to define who I was and how I understood myself as a child of God.

The next covenant I made gave me an active role in this sacred agreement between me, the Lord, and his people. On April 1, 1956 I professed faith for myself and was confirmed as an active member of the church. I admitted that I was a sinner, recognized Christ as my Savior, promised to live as a Christian to the best of my ability, to support the worship and work of the church to the best of my ability, and to work for the peace, unity, and purity of the church. On occasion I have kept those vows better at one stage of my life than another. But they remain my intention and my prayer.

If you are a member of this congregation you made those same promises. But are we really honoring the promises we have made before God and others. With only half of our members having made a financial commitment to support the church in this current year and with less than half of our members present for worship and study on a given Sunday, I would question whether we are intentionally honoring the promises we have made, either to God and to one another. It would be far better not to enter the covenant community at all then to enter it under false pretenses, with no intention or no effort to keep the promises we have made after receiving God's gracious promises to us.

On June 15, 1968 I entered into another covenant, the covenant of marriage. My wife and I made promises of fidelity and support to one another for life. But if we had no intention of keeping those vows then the covenant was not a covenant at all. It was rather a sham and it would have been far better not to enter into such a covenant if we had no commitment to keeping it.

On November 5, 1972 I entered into yet another covenant when I was ordained as a minister, a teaching elder in the church. On behalf of the entire Church of Jesus Christ, that little congregation in Norfolk, Virginia made promises to me and I made promises to them. We actually signed an agreement as to how we would serve and work together, how we would live and relate to one another under the authority of Christ. And on October 5, 1997 I renewed those promises to God and to God's

people as I was installed as your pastor. And so for me, the covenants of baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination and installation define my life, my work, my intentions and my hopes. They define me in my own mind and hopefully in the minds of my God, my wife, my children, my colleagues and companions within this covenant community called the Church of Jesus Christ.

My friends, what do we intend to be, to become and to do as individuals, as disciples of Jesus Christ, as a part of God's covenant community? Well, it all depends on the promises we have received undeservedly and professed unconditionally.

Last week we were all thrilled by the large and talented class of new members, 47 in all, who joined our covenant community called First (Scots) Presbyterian Church. But lest we celebrate too soon and assume that all is well among our members and our shared ministries, I would remind you that in December we placed 54 people on the inactive roll after at least two years on non-participation and non-support.

You see, getting people into the church may be the easiest part of our task as a covenant community. Making a covenant is not the challenge. Keeping it is! Getting our members involved and committed to the program and work is the major task. And failing in that, our members will exit the back door as easily as they entered the front.

Years ago I read a book by Robert Hudnut that reflected my own convictions with respect to the challenges before the contemporary church in America today. It was entitled The Sleeping Giant. You may not agree with Hudnut's assessment, but let me share it with you as I draw this message to a close and ask that you reflect upon it in your own life.

It (the church) has the most stringent standards of Membership of any organization in the world. "If a man would come after me," its founder said, "let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." If we can't buy the standards, then we should stay out of the church. If we're in and not measuring up, then we should either measure up or get out.

Too long have American churches seduced people for Christ. Lest the language be thought unduly harsh, it should be remembered that Webster's first definition of "seduce" is "to persuade (one) as to disobedience, disloyalty, or desertion of a lord of a cause." The soft sell of a soft gospel has attracted soft people to soft jobs, but it has not "turned the world upside down" for Jesus Christ. It has not "made disciples of all nations." It has not driven wealthy American churchmen into the ghettos, slums, and gutters of the world to pick up the children who are segregated, impoverished, and starved . . ."

Prayer:

O God, give us the grace to keep the promises we have made in the past and the resolutions that we are making today, and thus may we better keep covenant with you and with one another, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.