

Covenant: For You and For Many

Hebrews 8:6-12

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This coming week is the Fourth of July and, as every year, we will celebrate the birth of our country with fireworks and picnics, sparklers and parades. Like other holidays, many of us have family traditions or rituals that are important to our celebrations. Maybe your grandmother always made the same Jello salad on the Fourth so now you make it, too. Or your family always watches fireworks from the same spot while the kids play with sparklers. Of course, the Fourth isn't the only example of a holiday or event around which we create traditions and rituals. We do the same with anniversaries, birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and so on. Every family has their special ways of marking significant days. These rituals are important because they reinforce the identity and character of the family. If you know the rituals, then you must be one of us. They also create a bond between generations. Families tend to pass on traditions from generation to generation. Finally, rituals open the door to remembering - remembering the special people or important events that define or connect us.

Of course, this is true in our faith tradition, as well. Our scripture, liturgy, and sacraments connect us to the stories which have given our faith meaning for thousands of years. For example, every time we take Communion, there is a liturgy, a prayer, we use that is called The Great Thanksgiving and reminds us of our faith history. While some of the language in The Great Thanksgiving can be adapted for a particular season or holy day, the parts of the prayer are always the same. First, we greet each other and then we give thanks to God. We tell the story of God's creation of the world and the covenants God has made with God's people. We remember the long history of human rebellion and God's deep desire to shape us into good and holy people. Then, we give thanks for Jesus Christ and speak about who he was and what he did during his human life. As we reach the end of that story, we remember his last supper with his disciples. After that, we ask God to send the Holy Spirit to bless the communion elements and draw us together in communion with God and with each other. Finally, we anticipate the day when God's kin-dom is fulfilled and Christ comes again.

The act of remembering is at the heart of the prayer as it is with so many rituals. In fact, "remember me" is what Jesus instructs his disciples in what we now call the words of institution. We say, "On the night in which he gave himself up for us, he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." When the supper was over, he took the cup, gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples, and said: "Drink from this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

These words are most holy. In the Catholic Church, it is when the priest says these words that they believe the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ. In the United Methodist Church, these are the words that consecrate the elements and they point to God's last great covenant with humanity - the new covenant.

For the last few weeks, we have been talking about how the whole biblical narrative is built on a series of covenants between God and God's people. Most of these covenants - that with Noah, with Abraham, and with Moses - happen in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The stories helped the people of Israel to understand their own history, the character of God, and their identity as God's people. God made each covenant in response to humanity's tendency toward evil and self-destruction. With Noah, God promised to never wipe out creation again. With Abraham, God decided to create one nation of people who would live in godliness and be an example to others of what a whole and healthy life might look like. When that didn't work, God made another covenant with the people of Israel but this time gave them instructions - the ten commandments - as well as hundreds of very specific guidelines for how to keep the commandments.

So, the whole of the Hebrew Bible is made up of this pattern in which God resolves to restore humanity to goodness and wholeness but then humanity rebels. Over the centuries, God sends prophets to show the people they are breaking the covenant and to warn them of the coming destruction. But, the people don't listen. They begin to worship pagan gods and follow pagan ways until finally the northern state of Israel is taken over by the Assyrians and some time later the southern state of Judah is taken over by the Babylonians. All of the brightest and most influential people - the leaders and the scholars and the priests - are sent into exile in Babylon. Jerusalem is sacked. The temple is destroyed. All appears to be lost.

But, woven in among all of the prophets' words of warning and doom, there is this thread of hope. Our scripture passage from Hebrews today is mostly a quotation from Jeremiah, a prophet who witnessed the destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem. The first half of the book of Jeremiah is his proclamation that the Jews brought this upon themselves by disobeying God. Yet, he pauses in his condemnation of them to offer this vision that some day, God will make a new covenant with humanity.

This new covenant is the one we as Christians believe Jesus came to mediate. So, how is it different from the covenants before it? Well, for one thing, from Jeremiah we learn that God will put the law within the people and write it on their hearts. This is a stark contrast to the ten commandments which were written on stone tablets. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible comments, "The passage suggests that a law outwardly written on tablets of stone may elicit disobedience, or else grudging or insincere obedience; next time, therefore, God will write the law inwardly. Making it a part of the total will of the people, so that they obey God, not because they are supposed to, but because they want to".

Furthermore, with God's law written on their hearts, the people will know God. They will know within themselves who God is through the stories which define their identity as God's people. This knowledge will also be accessible to all of God's people, the least and the greatest.

The other important characteristic of the new covenant is the promise that God will forgive the people's sins. God is giving up a relationship with them based on sin and punishment, and all of their rebellion and disobedience will be forgiven so they will have a new start.

When Jesus says "this is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins", it is as if he is making this promise of forgiveness permanent and unchanging. In the past, the people were expected to bring sacrifices to the temple and offer them

to God as an expression of their repentance for their disobedience. They would pray and ask for forgiveness, give God their offering, and leave knowing their relationship with God had been restored. Once a year, on Yom Kippur, the priest would sacrifice a goat and offer it to God while praying for the forgiveness of all the people's sins. One way to understand the idea of the new covenant is to think of Jesus's death as the last sacrifice. After his death and resurrection, God's grace and forgiveness will always be available to all people directly without need of sacrifices.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the covenant God made with the people when Moses brought them the ten commandments and the new covenant is that it is based solely on God's love. Under the previous covenant, people could be in right relationship with God only by obeying the law, so only through their own efforts. William Barclay points out that with the new covenant, a person's relationship with God is not dependent on following the commandments "but solely on the grace and the love and the mercy of God".

While the new covenant was first made with the people of Israel, Jesus broke open the kingdom to include everyone. Jesus told the disciples to go out into the world with this good news and share it wherever they went. That is how we come to participate in the new covenant, as well. And what does this all mean for us as people who inherit the new covenant? It means that there is nothing we can do or say that stands between us and God. We know, written on our hearts, what is of God, what is holy. If we make mistakes and harmful choices and acknowledge them, God will always forgive them. So, no matter what is in your past, no matter what you may feel guilty or ashamed of, God is waiting with love and grace to forgive you.

In Hebrews, Paul goes as far as to say the new covenant obliterates the old. With the perspective of time, we realize that we cannot claim that the new covenant supersedes every covenant before it. In fact, to do so has led to centuries of anti-semitism. Rather, we share with our Jewish siblings these covenantal stories. Together, we take comfort that throughout history, God has sought to be in relationship with us and has created this series of covenants to help us be the holy and good people God created us to be. But, families grow and change. New rituals are folded into the family story. So, like the Jews remember their escape from slavery and death through celebrating the Passover, we remember Jesus's last supper to celebrate that God sent Jesus to us and to all, to teach us, love us, and save us with a promise of grace and forgiveness. Thanks be to God. Amen.