

“Anticipating and Participating in Grace”
October 21, 2007

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Luke 18:1-8

How many of you thought about what you were doing this morning when you got up, got ready, and got yourself to church? How many of you – now be honest – debated or at least grumbled about whether or not to show up here this morning? And for those of you who didn’t engage in the whether to go to church debate today, haven’t most of you done that some other Sunday morning?

Whether your hand was one of the first to go up just now or it was one of those hands that stayed resolutely out of sight, whether you’re here out of habit or because the “go to church” voice within you won today’s debate about how to spend a Sunday morning, the fact is ... you’re here. But *why* are you here? Why are *we* here?

Believe me; I’m not trying to plant any additional seeds of doubt about the wisdom of gathering in this church or any church on a Sunday morning. I sure don’t want to chase any of you away, and I don’t want to encourage you to do something else next Sunday morning! But what I do want to do is to ask all of us to be attuned to our individual and communal senses of why we’re here. I want us to be attuned to our sense of what calls us together and to our sense of what we’re called to do and to offer now that we’re here.

These are always important questions in the life of a community of faith – or of *any* community, for that matter. But this morning, they have a more immediate relevance for at least two reasons. One is that this is the day when we welcome and celebrate new members into this congregation. And just as this group of almost-members has thought about whether – and why – to join this congregation, all of us need to think about why we’re here and whether we’re still committed to being here.

The questions of why we’re here, what brought us here, and what we’re here to offer have additional relevance this morning because Stewardship Season is upon us. As each of us considers what financial support we will pledge to this church for the coming year, it is helpful and faithful to become rooted in a deeper sense of why God has brought us together and what God is asking of us now that we’re here.

So what is your deeper sense of why you’re here and what you’re asked to do and to give in this church community? The possible answers to those questions are literally limitless. Different faiths, different life experiences, different perspectives, different personalities all shape the answers we might give. And here, in this congregation within the United Church of Christ, we are *especially* dedicated to insisting on our different and unique understandings and expressions of faith. So I can’t claim to know how you would describe your reasons for being here or what you’re willing to offer here. I can’t claim to know that, and I’m not going to pretend that I can.

Yet, in the midst of our theological differences and diversity, we do have something that we embrace together. We do have something that binds us to one another and to God, something that expresses our commitment *and our challenge* to one another. That “something” is our church covenant. It’s in your bulletins, and it is what we ask

new members to affirm and current members to reaffirm whenever we welcome someone into the life and ministry of this church.

In the midst of our diversity, differences, and disagreements, this is the covenant that we make with God and with one another. This is the covenant that is our congregational answer to those pesky questions, “Why are you here, what called you here, and what of yourself are you called to give here?”

This is *our* covenant. Whether it is familiar or strange to you, I urge you: open yourselves to its words and to its spirit. Wrestle with it as you need to, embrace it as you can, and let it guide and challenge you.

And, my, oh, my, what challenges it lays before us! Just look at the very last words of our covenant, the words in which we promise “to answer God’s call to be the body of Christ.” Now, I realize that the “body of Christ” is one of those phrases that can confound as easily as it can guide and that can alienate as easily as it can invite. So I ask you to allow me to invite you into this part of our covenant by offering what I hear in it.

When we reaffirm our covenant to be the body of Christ in the world, I believe we are embracing God’s call to be

the hands that offer reconciliation and not revenge;
the eyes that see the beauty in those the world considers ugly and of no use;
the mouth that speaks the truth to power with courage and passion;
the ears that hear the cry, “Have mercy on me,” from the poor, the lost, the
hungry, the imprisoned, and the foreigner; and
the heart that loves all of God’s creation and all of God’s people.

Here, in our covenant to be the body of Christ, is part of “the law” that, through the prophet Jeremiah, God promised long ago to write on our hearts, so that God could be our God and we could be God’s people.

So how do you think you’re doing with honoring the last line of our covenant? Are you acting with those hands, eyes, mouths, ears, and hearts in everything you do? In most things? In some things? In a few?

And how are you doing – how are *we* doing – with the promises that come before the last one? To make this seem a little more manageable, let’s forget, for a moment, the first two-thirds of the covenant, and just look at the last section. Are we loving, supporting, listening, learning, forgiving, trusting, and praying for and with one another? Are we?

Well, yes, sometimes we are. Sometimes we do indeed keep our covenant with one another, and at those times the world moves a little closer toward true *Shalom*. But at other times ... at other times, we break our covenant. We break it in our inattention and in our anger, and we also break it simply out of habit.

As much as I love and delight in this congregation, as much as I see the beauty of God breaking into the world through you, I still have to say that you – let’s make that “we” – do not always honor and keep the promises we’ve made in covenant with one another.

Now if you’re sitting in a pew (or in a choir chair), thinking I’m wrong, if you’re sitting there thinking that we – or at least you – actually keep this covenant in all that you do, I have two questions for you. First question: The last time you were in a two or three

hour church committee meeting, did you genuinely, lovingly listen to *everything* that *everyone* said? Did you? Did you *really*? Second question (and this one is a bit more serious): Take a moment to remember the things you've said in the last week or two about other people in the congregation. Can you truthfully say that you spoke all of those words in love, with a commitment to support and trust the people you were talking about?

So I'll say it again and with confidence: we do not always keep the promises we have made to God and to each other in our covenant. I doubt that this is news to you. If you've honestly taken stock of yourselves and your church, you know that we don't manage to be true to our covenant all the time. You know that, and you've experienced it more than once. And here's the miracle of it all; here's the grace. Knowing that we've been disappointed, hurt, even betrayed by one another, we keep coming back. Knowing our own and each other's imperfections, we keep gathering, offering ourselves to one another and to the God who has called us here.

We keep gathering, believing that we have not yet exhausted God's abundant grace and anticipating that, through grace, we will be able to live into our covenant a little more fully and a little more generously, bit by bit. We keep gathering, hoping and trusting that we will be able to do more of the things we have covenanted to do. We keep gathering, wanting to receive and to offer the healing power of God's love and grace. And we keep gathering, with an understanding somewhere within us that we can do those things only if we do them together.

Martin Luther King, Jr., described this as the reality that "all life is interrelated," and he explained it this way. "Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

In our covenant and in our life together, this congregation tries to live the truth of that interrelatedness. You give of yourselves, your time, your love, your talents, and your money, so that someone else might become who he or she is called to be. And because that someone else moves closer to being who he or she is called to be, you, too, become more fully the person God created you to be. "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be."

In our covenant and in our life together, we accept one of Jesus' hardest and most important teachings: those who seek to save their lives, those who keep their energies and their resources focused on themselves, will lose their lives, but those who lose their lives for the gospel, those who offer themselves fully in loving, courageous service, will save their lives. Those who anticipate God's grace and blessing by opening their hearts and hands will participate in God's grace and blessing in the life of the whole world.

You have come here to one another by grace. God has called you here and asks you to *anticipate* and welcome the power of holy love, justice, and grace. God has called you here and asks you to *participate* in the spread of love, justice, and grace throughout the world.

In stewardship season and out; in fall, winter, spring, and summer; in all the seasons of your lives, respond to God's call ever more freely, ever more courageously, ever more generously. God's grace abounds, but it needs your hearts and your lives to become more fully present in a world that desperately needs it.

Remember the covenant we affirm today. Let it be written on your hearts. Remember why you're here, why you are a part of this motley, beautiful, blessed group of people. Give of yourself generously and joyously, and participate in God's glorious work here and in the rest of the world. Seek God's grace always, so that you can live into the covenant you have entered. And let grace guide you and bless you in all you do.

Amen.

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