

“The Highs and Lows of Covenant”
December 10, 2006
New Member Sunday

Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

While I was in divinity school, I served as a field education student at one of the United Church of Christ congregations in the town where Chey and I were living. I did a variety of things during my two years at that church. My time there was rich in blessings, but it was also quite limited. There were many things I didn't have the opportunity to do and many others that I was able to do only a little.

As you might imagine, my time as a student minister left me longing for the day when I would become the pastor of a congregation, to do what I had been practicing and preparing to do. You and God have now blessed me with that day and so much more. But even though the gifts and the challenges here have been far more expansive than they were in my days of student ministry, there was something missing here, something that was missing until just recently. And that something was the joy of meeting with people interested in joining the church. At the Northampton church, I co-led the new members' class four times. Each time, it was glorious; each time, it was surprising.

Today is, at last, my first New Member Sunday, here at the First Congregational Church of Sonoma. That something that was missing is missing no more. I have now had the privilege, joy, and delight to meet and begin to get to know a group of people who have experienced a call, a spiritual stirring, to come here. A group of people who have experienced a call, a spiritual stirring, to join you all, this particular collection of loving, beautiful, blessed, and imperfect people. This morning, you the congregation will have the privilege and joy of receiving and welcoming eight new members of the First Congregational Church of Sonoma.

I urge you, if you have moments of doubt that God is still at work in the world, in the weeks and months and years ahead, to get to know each and every one of the people who are joining the church this morning. Listen to their stories, their questions, their hopes and dreams, and you will hear of God's grace and gentle nudgings. If you have doubts that God is still at work here, in this church, in this congregation, I urge again to get to know each and every one of the people who will soon be members of this church. Listen to their stories, to what drew them to FCC and what they've already found here, and you will hear of God's love and God's expansive welcome.

One of my favorite moments in our new member meetings over the last several weeks occurred when one of the group asked, “Are there any strings? Are there strings attached to becoming a member?” As I remember it, this question came, appropriately enough, on Stewardship Sunday, so, as you might imagine, I did mention the importance of financial support for the church and its ministries in the community and in the world.

But that question took us beyond financial matters and into the broader question of what it means to join a church ... what it means to join *this* church. What *does* it mean? What does it *require*? And those questions took and still take us into the idea of covenant. They take us into the covenant of the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, the covenant that is the basis of membership in this church. You see, this church doesn't

require the profession of a certain belief, it doesn't require the adoption of a certain theology, it doesn't require submission to the authority of a pope, a council, a denominational body, or even a minister, before someone can become a full member of this congregation. But that doesn't mean that there are no strings attached, because what this congregation does ask, is that anyone seeking membership be willing to enter into a covenantal relationship with this church and all its members.

Later in this morning's service, as we all affirm and re-affirm our covenant with one another, I urge you to take the words we say seriously. Take them, explore them, find their meaning in your own minds and hearts, and then try to live into them. After spending some time with the people who are joining the church today, I can confidently say that no two of them interpret the words of our covenant in exactly the same way. And I can, with the same confidence, say that no two current members of this church interpret the words of our covenant in exactly the same way, either. But don't worry. This lack of agreement is not a bad thing. Keep in mind that God doesn't call us together so we will *agree* with one another; God calls us together so we will *love* one another.

So I invite you to listen to the words we will speak together, covenanting with God and each other to be God's people of love, justice, healing, and peace. But before we speak those words of covenant together, I'd like us to take a little time to explore why we're entering into a *covenant* to begin with. Why not a "promise" or an "agreement" or even a "contract"? My dictionary suggests that the different words are often interchangeable, but "covenant" has a particular meaning and a particular resonance within the Jewish and Christian traditions. Those traditions and the lived experience of being in covenanted relationships point to three qualities that make covenant the blessed – and blessedly hard – commitment that it is.

The first is voluntariness. Here, in this church, and in the United Church of Christ, there is no requirement to be a member – to be in covenant – before you are welcome here; no requirement to be a member before you are loved here; before you can participate in the life of this community of faith. No requirement. No matter what you need, no matter how long or short a time you've been coming here, no matter whether you're the moderator's neighbor or the minister's spouse ... you do not have to become a member by entering into covenant with this church before you will be welcomed, loved, and celebrated here. So that first quality of covenant is voluntariness. There can be no true covenant where there is coercion.

Covenant also requires mutuality. Regular ol' contracts and agreements require mutuality, too, but it's a different kind of mutuality, with a very different set of expectations. The mutuality in contracts is always rooted in a *quid pro quo*. I promise to do something for you, but only in exchange for your promise to do something for me. I'll paint your house, but only if you pay me for the work. You'll give me a sushi lunch every week for a year, but only if I'll cook you dinner every week. You'll transfer the title of your car to me, but only if I pay you an agreed amount. With a contract, even if the parties have the best of intentions, there's always the reality in the background, that if one person doesn't live up to her part of the bargain, the other person doesn't have to live up to his, either. Once one party fails to comply with the terms of the agreement, the other party is essentially off the hook. So, with contracts and other agreements, there *is* mutuality, but I'd call it "mutuality minus." Mutuality *minus* the commitment to hang in

there when the going gets rough; mutuality *minus* the commitment to accept the incompleteness or imperfection of one another's "performance" of the contract.

The mutuality of covenant runs much deeper and is really much more demanding. Covenant invites us to make commitments to God and to one another and to continue to honor those commitments even when, *especially* when, we believe one of our partners in covenant hasn't been able to honor them. This is not about a quid pro quo. It's not a covenant if you promise to love, listen, forgive, and pray for the people sitting next to you in the pew, only if they love, listen, forgive, and pray for you to your satisfaction. (Or, if that is what you're doing, maybe we should talk!) We can't enter into true covenant with God and with one another if we're going to keep score. We can't enter into true covenant if we're going to count the units of love, support, and prayer someone has given us, so that we can decide how many units of love, support, and prayer to give to them.

So we enter into true covenant only when we accept the inevitability of our own and each other's failures to honor our covenantal commitments perfectly. We enter into true covenant only when we no longer have one foot out the door, ready to leave if someone disappoints or hurts us. We are all human. There have been and will be times when we're so mad at someone else that loving him or praying for her seems close to impossible. There have been and will be times when someone has hurt or disappointed us so deeply that forgiveness and trust seem outside the realm of possibility. The mutuality of covenant calls us not to abandon our covenantal partners when we believe they have failed to honor their commitments. The mutuality of covenant calls us, whenever possible, to stay put and deepen our own commitment to love and healing, patience and forgiveness.

And it's the third quality of covenant that makes this sort of mutuality possible. The third quality of covenant is its rootedness and dependence on God's redeeming grace. Without grace, we would be a group of people who stay together only as long as it was easy to stay together. Without grace, we would be a people far less able to forgive and be forgiven. We would be a social club, a service agency, or a political affinity group. Grace is what makes it possible to live the paradox of keeping covenant even in the midst of breaking it.

One of my own experiences of the power of grace in covenant came many years ago at another church in Massachusetts. During a time of great transition and powerful emotions, something happened that left several people wounded, distrustful, and angry. I was one of those people, and I know I was tempted to walk away, to try to leave the hurt behind. But I didn't walk away; I kept showing up on Sunday mornings to be in community and covenant with those other folks who were wounded, distrustful, and angry. And the most amazing thing happened. Each Sunday, even though for a long time, none of us was able to do more than acknowledge each other's presence, we always made sure that we shook hands with one another and said, "Peace," during the passing of the peace. Grace moved us to seek each other out during that part of the worship service, and grace preserved the covenant even when we couldn't. And over time, we were able to offer and receive forgiveness from each other. That's the power of grace in covenant.

The covenant we will enter and re-affirm this morning is voluntary; it is mutual; and it is utterly dependent on God's grace. We need each other as partners in this covenant, so that neither the highs nor the lows of our love and support for one another

will threaten this blessed covenant. We need each other as companions in our joy and in our sorrow. We need each other as vehicles of God's never-ending grace.

As we celebrate the new life these new members bring, let us rejoice and give thanks for their presence. Let us rejoice and give thanks for all the blessings that they offer. And let us dedicate ourselves anew to living into the hope and vision of the covenant that binds us to one another and to God.

Amen.

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