

I will make a new covenant



Jeremiah 31:27-34

"The days are coming", declares the Lord, "when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men and of animals. Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant", declares the Lord. "In those days people will no longer say, 'the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'. Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes-his own teeth will be set on edge. "The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, through I was a husband to them" declares the Lord. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time", declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord', because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest", declares the Lord.

"Covenant Renewal"

The Jews had broken their promise to be God's people. They had sinned by failing to obey the commands of the Torah. In addition, the king had stopped calling upon the Lord and had made unholy alliances with foreign powers. As a result, the Holy City of Jerusalem was leveled by war and the Jews were carried off into exile in Babylonia. Although the exiles flourished in the beautiful city of Babylon by following Jeremiah's word from the Lord to marry, have children, plant crops and seek the welfare of the city, the religious were deeply troubled. Devout Jews were saying: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge'. Faithful Jews shared a common mood of spiritual despair which sounded something like: "What's the use of trying---our ancestors have done wrong and we are paying the price". Because their Jewish community had broken their promises to the Lord, they thought that the promise making-promise-keeping covenantal relationship with the Holy One of Israel was over and done with. Without the benefit of temple worship and the priestly system of offering sacrifices, they couldn't see a way to right their relationship with God. God's people couldn't, but Yahweh, Israel's Covenant Maker, could.

God could, and did. By means of covenant renewal, the Holy One revised the covenant between God and humans to make it a matter of the heart and mind. In the updated version, the Lord made it possible for Jews to know the passions of God's heart, and gain a personal understanding of God's will by studying the Word of the Lord in Holy Scripture. In 'Questions of Faith' Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote: "I read the Torah as Jews have read it and loved it for centuries. For example, I can tell you what is the middle word in the Torah. Over the generations Jewish scholars have read the Torah not as a novel to see how it ends, but as a love letter. For instance, "Why did he use this word here instead of a period? That's the way you read a love letter and wonder, "What did he or she mean by this word? We Jews have seen the Torah as not just a book of stories or a law code, but as a love letter from God'.

After the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. by the Roman Empire, the first Christians believed that God had renewed the Holy Covenant again. They believed that Jesus had been The Word of God made flesh; the way, truth, and life of God. And so they poured over the Old Testament scriptures and wrote gospel stories about the new covenant that the Lord had written for them in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Because they so believed, we religious now have the benefit of reading the good news story of Jesus over and over again together, until we come to know God's love for us and Christ's Church. With devotion, we take a close look at Jesus' words and deeds to see what Jesus did, how he loved others, what he said, and with whom he fellowshiped. We can imagine ourselves befriending him as he tells us everything he knew about his Heavenly Father and about God's promise to bring life eternal from heaven into earth.

The covenant that binds us together as Christ's Church begins:

"We the members of The First Church of West Bridgewater united by the love of one another and guided by the teachings of Jesus . . . "

You may recall Jesus' teaching of the First and Second Commandments that summed up all the laws of Moses and teachings of the prophets. They come to us as relationship mandates. 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength' is the first and greatest commandment. The second, Jesus said, was like unto it. 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'. In gospel speak this means that there is no relationship in life, law, or eternity greater than these. In his commentary on these relationships of Covenantal Love, Biblical scholar Marcus Borg wrote: 'You can keep the commandments and still be a jerk. But you cannot be in relationship with the loving God, without being continually transformed by 'God, the Great, 'I AM' which means, to be what the future demands. Rev. Ron Buford explained: 'Our God is not a God of outmoded rules and laws, keeping people separated---people do that. By contrast, the rule of God's living love is to always take another look and see the relationship with each other and God as primary. If you want to know where God is, Jesus says, look to

where the Love of God bends toward making the life of each person as wonderful as God wants life to be for us in light of the present'.

As covenantal members of First Church, we make promises to God and each other, to bend together in this present light of Holy Love. The remainder of our covenant reads: 'We the members . . . hold it to be our purpose to maintain a welcoming house for the worship of God; to teach and study the lessons of our faith, to develop programs for those in need; and to sponsor fellowship opportunities. All this we support in order to build a mutually sustaining and caring community of faith'.

Personally, I love stewardship season in our church. It gives me the opportunity to reassess the ways in which I can best help us bend together in God's Love as a congregation. Like you, in light of present realities, I will make personal choices about the amount of money I can give to support the ministries of First Church. And, when I consider the giving of my time and talents, I will be ending, renewing, and/or promising to invest myself in a new ministry. This year, I am committing Monday afternoons to help the Historical Committee preserve our historical records and build our First Church Library. I will be teaching the Sunday 9 a.m. Teen Worship Class again, and building our S.A.F.E.T.Y.net Tuesday night fellowship. I will be working with the deacons to renew our Confirmation program. In the community, I will be serving on the W.B. Sidewalk Committee.

Stewardship season is the Holy Spirit's moment for reminding religious pew sitters like you and me, that it is covenant renewal time. Time to bend with the Love of God toward making the life of others as wonder as God wants it to be in light of our present circumstances. She is at work, moving each of us to consider the ways in which we can serve the Lord with gladness in old and new ways in 2017. She is tapping each of us on the shoulder and saying: 'The Lord has need of you'. . . to make and keep commitments of your treasures, talents, and time for the increase of your faith and for the well being of First Church's corporate soul. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.