

Community Membership: Widening the Circle

Isaiah 40:1-11 *A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God...."*

2 Peter 3:8-15a *Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God...?*

The Church of the Covenant was born out of a particular vision: to be the kind of faith community in which each person can grow into the fullness of life that Jesus taught and embodied; the kind of community in which each person is encouraged and challenged to undertake an inward journey of prayer, self-understanding, and spiritual growth, and an outward journey of perceiving and following God's call to a particular mission in the service of life. This way of being the church offers the opportunity to make a commitment to spiritual practices or disciplines that deepen our lives in God and the unfolding of our lives as God has made us to be. Our community tries to take seriously Jesus' call to "give up everything and follow" him, to lose our lives in order to find our true lives, to discover through a life of committed faith what Jesus called "eternal life," the fullness of life as God created it for us. All of this is entering into partnership with God in the renewal and restoration of the world as God's good creation.

Thus far Covenant Membership has been the only way offered for making this kind of commitment to a life of faith through this community. When the church was established, a statement of commitment was developed, called "Our Covenant One with Another." There is a copy of this in the bulletin this morning. This covenant includes seven spiritual disciplines that Covenant Members accept and work with as guides for their living. A person who feels called to Covenant Membership first spends some time as an Intern Member, getting to know our community, working with the disciplines, exploring the missions we are engaged in, and discerning what he or she feels called to do. At a point when the Intern Member feels ready, she or he makes a commitment to Covenant Membership, which can be renewed each year. Besides working with their own spiritual lives, Covenant Members take full and ultimate responsibility for the Church of the Covenant. Monthly meetings are times of discernment and decision-making in an atmosphere of prayer and honest sharing that seeks the guidance of God's spirit for our community. It has been said through the years that if in any particular year no Covenant Member makes a recommitment, the Church of the Covenant ceases to exist. This keeps the life of our community fresh and real, as a matter of complete freedom to respond to God's call in Christ. The claim of Christian discipleship on the totality of our lives must come from a free and deep desire of the heart, so that we give our lives gladly and joyously in commitment. It must not be heavy and burdensome, but a joyful and freely undertaken journey in spirit of what Jesus called his yoke that is easy and his burden that is light.

This community has tried to take seriously and practically what it really means to live by faith and to follow Jesus Christ today--growing in faithfulness and learning to trust God completely for our life; understanding the church, not as a building or even an organization, but as a community of persons growing in their capacity to give themselves to God as fully as they are able; doing the work of the church not by committees and structures of bureaucracy but by the movement of God's spirit in the lives of persons and small groups moving out in specific missions that serve the needs of the community of faith itself or the wider world. In all of these things, we are trying the best that we can to live the life of God's love—discovering and practicing what it really means to love ourselves as God loves us, to love each other in community, and to love the world through the sharing of the gifts God has given us through the diverse ways God calls us to serve.

About nine months ago, I asked the Covenant Members to consider developing another type of membership, so that persons desiring to make a commitment to Christ through this community can do so if they, for their own good reasons, do not feel called to Covenant Membership. I proposed this because in the time I have been with you, I have seen here a community of commitment, not just Covenant Members but all of you who are here for worship week after week, who are prayerful people, who are serious about your faith and living out your faith, who are involved with and committed to service to others in various ways. It did not make sense to me that Covenant Membership should be the only affirmation and expression of commitment. We need to recognize what God has already made here—a community of Covenant Members and others who are all one community of devoted faith and service. If we are a community focused on nurturing faith as a life of commitment to prayer and service, the inward and outward journeys, then we need to affirm all who desire to make a commitment to Christ, to their own life of faith, and to this community's life and ministries, and who will perhaps bring us new missions.

The Community Member Commitment adopted by the Covenant Members is also in the bulletin this morning. It is it both the same as and different from "Our Covenant One with Another." It expresses membership in terms of commitment. The points of commitment are not as specific in some areas. For instance, there is financial commitment, but not tithing, regular prayer and reading of scripture, though not necessarily daily, and there is not what we refer to as accountability—sharing with and seeking help from others regarding difficulties we experience with the spiritual disciplines. It is an invitation to participate in this community of faith by responding to a call to commitment to follow Jesus Christ with our whole lives. The Community Member commitment is stated as simply as possible, so that a child or young person might understand and embrace it. Community Membership is consistent with vision of the Church of the Covenant to be a community that moves beyond "church membership" as having one's name on a roll to a life of discipleship that makes faith in God through Jesus Christ the dynamic and shaping center of one's life.

The Covenant Members took a good while to consider this change. It was not an easy path. It meant a difference from the past, an adding of something new. There were concerns that such a change not affect the basic vision of the Church of the Covenant, that this would not lead us away from what has been called the "integrity of church membership," that being part of the church needs to mean

something real and central in our lives. And yet, in the end, we came to consensus, which means that some still had concerns but felt willing to move into this new way being opened up for us.

My hope is that some of you who have been and felt a part of this community for so long might consider making the commitment to Community Membership. It is not only important for us to offer this kind of membership as a sign of openness but for those who desire to be part of this community to make an expression of that desire and commitment. It builds us up in our common devotion to Christ and the life of faith. I think this would be a very simple thing. Those wishing to become Community Members would do so on a Sunday morning during worship, a time to express their desire and willingness and a time for us to receive their commitment with a prayer of thanksgiving. And each year, we would have a Sunday morning service devoted to the recommitment of Community and Covenant Members who desire to commit for another year.

Why do we do all of this? Why all the fuss about commitment and spiritual disciplines and so forth? It is not about legalism or trying to be spiritually superior to others—at least it should not be that! It is about living life as God made it to be lived and calls us to live, fulfilling God's purposes in our lives and experiencing the fullness of life. It is about our lives being in harmony with God's desire that the world be restored and renewed as God's good creation.

Let's go back to that reading from the Second Letter of Peter. We may have difficulty with the images of "the day of the Lord" that the writer uses--the heavens passing away with a loud noise, the elements dissolving with fire. But these images need not keep us from getting to the deeper message here. God's purposes for us and the world are good and sure. We can count on it. Life does not just go on and on the way it is at any moment. The powers and structures of violence and destructiveness that often seem so dominant do not, in reality, have an ultimate future. There is a power and mystery in the depths of life that moves toward completeness, toward what is right and good. The writer of Second Peter was saying to the church in the late part of the first century that as bad as everything looks, God will bring about the reign of peace, justice, compassion, love. Those are the things that are lasting, not the other stuff. And Jesus has called us to live according to the way things really are, the way God made life to be and will ultimately be.

This keen and deep sense of God's sure purposes, according to the writer of Second Peter, calls us to a life of integrity and expectation. As the writer put it, in light of God's purposes life, we are to respond by "leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God." Our expectancy and hope create lives of waiting for that "new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home." This kind of waiting is active waiting in which we strive to live in right relationships with each other, with other human beings, and with all the creation. That is what it means to make a home for righteousness. We embrace the life of commitment and faith, a life of spiritual practices or disciplines, not in order to be somehow perfect or to become centered on ourselves and our own goodness, but in order to, as Isaiah put it, make a highway in the desert for the coming of God into the world. As the writer of 2 Peter puts it, the deepest motivation for the life of faith we are striving to live is that by doing so, we actually hasten the coming of God's realm, that new heaven and new earth where righteousness is at home. We make our commitments, we practice the disciplines of

the inward and outward journeys, we struggle with and grow in this life of faith for the sake of the world. What we undertake, though it seems to us so small and insignificant at times, has the effect in hastening the fulfillment of God's loving will in the world.

The Church of the Covenant offers one way of entering into this life of making our lives highways for God's movement into the world, of living so that we hasten the coming of God's reign over life. This is not the only way and it may not even be the best way; we must remember that in order to keep from veering off into spiritual arrogance. But it is a way envisioned fifty years ago that still offers to those who feel called to it a life of giving themselves completely to God through following the living Christ and incorporating his teachings into their lives. It is, as Jesus called it, the narrow way that leads to the broad expanse of God's kingdom, life as God means it to be.

By adding Community Membership as another expression of Christian discipleship, we widen the circle of commitment and faith to include all, community and Covenant Members alike. We seek to affirm and encourage all who desire to take seriously Christ's call in their lives, to enter into community willing to love and be loved, to discover and use their gifts in the service of God's creation, while affirming, respecting, and nurturing the gifts and callings of others. And in all of this, we seek God's grace and spirit that we might be a community of those who are making their lives channels of God's coming into the world, hastening the day when the world will be restored in God's healing, compassion, justice, and peace.