

SERMON

September 21, 2014

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In a dear friendship, a good marriage, or in our Church of the Covenant community, life has its ups and downs. Overwhelmingly, this community is life itself to me. Today I am sharing out of the abundance of our life together.

When I was 19 years old I became a Covenant member of the Church of the Covenant. For three formative years after I began college in 1954, I took every opportunity that I could, to be with this little church community. Randolph-Macon Women's College gave me four good years of education and lifelong friends which are dear to me, but the real excitement in my life during those years was here at the Church of the Covenant. I came to know what it was like to be in Community and to know the Love of God as I had never known it before. The Kingdom of God began to have real meaning for me. This community nurtured and continues to nurture me. The feeling is like that of being so rich that there is nothing to do but share! God's grace is very real and the meaning of life becomes much more than just my life. In the community of Love wherever it may be, hearts become bursting to share that Love, indeed to share the reason for the hope that they have come to know! Will's love of the church helped ameliorate my mother's concern that I had abandoned my Presbyterian roots. It has been such a joy and such an important part of my life that Will and I have shared our love for the Church of the Covenant since we were teenagers.

I reread this jewel each fall: 'The Journey of a Lifetime' written by David Edwards in 2011. It begins: "On the first Sunday of October, 1954 a small Christian community officially gathered for worship as the Church of the Covenant in

Lynchburg, Virginia.”

Here's another jewel written in 1956 largely by Bev Cosby. “In the town of Lynchburg, Virginia, is a house whose life you would love to touch. To open its doors is to find yourself in the midst of a people caught up in a great adventure.”

Could it be that together we are still caught up in a great adventure- a full sixty years after we first began? I am sure that we are each Sunday, whether I am present here with you in our service as I am today or upstairs with our children as we worship together. I am sure that we are caught up in a great adventure most every day in my devotional time. I am convinced every Wednesday as we gather to worship and then discuss over breakfast our weekly Lectionary readings. I am also sure in my Chrysalis mission group meetings, in our Covenant Life Classes, and in our Covenant member meetings and our Combined Covenant and Community member meetings. We are caught up in a great adventure!

It is that time of year again when the opportunity, indeed the invitation, presents itself for Commitment and for Re-commitment to membership in the Church of the Covenant. October 5 is just around the corner and the meaning of membership in this community is very much on my mind and my heart.

Church of the Covenant founders envisioned more than just a group of people with an ideal and great determination. The vision was for this little group “to become a fellowship aglow with the radiance of Jesus and flooded with God's love. ... They shall build their church to be as the shade of a rock in a weary land.” Some of us feel the word refuge best expresses our experience of community today. Lofty? Idealistic? Well, perhaps but what we experience as the specialness of this community is very hard to put into words. I can express our uniqueness in no better

way.

Becoming a member of the Church of the Covenant is an outward sign that we are ready to share responsibility for the life and health of this community at the same time we seek to find our own way. The experience of being in a mission group gives one a taste of the fullness that pervades one's own life as she shares life with others in the mission group and in the mission. Participation and membership keeps this community growing!

Throughout the twentieth century the Church of the Covenant waxed and waned, waxed and waned, again and again. Our life has spilled over into the community through various missions and spread throughout the country and the world through people with whom we have shared life here. Through it all we continue to share life together at 4415 Boonsboro Road. The four essential elements of our founding - commitment, relationships, smallness, and concern for faith worldwide are still intact. At the same time, we remain open and continue to evolve as time passes. Our Covenant continues at our center; our accent may currently be on our Inward Journey whereas there was a time when our Outward Journey was the emphasis. The invitation for commitment comes up every fall, like clockwork! The twenty-first century, we find, cries out for brotherhood and sisterhood with people of all faiths and even of no faith, not simply of Christian faith! So, as I see things, we adapt to the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the years, as we wrestle as a community, just as we do as individuals, to find our way. Surely this community is not for everyone, but for those of us who choose to be a part, we know that the unique structure and the dynamics of our life together with its ups and downs continue to sustain us.

Consider the traditional church. Usually one makes a one time commitment and then just does what comes naturally. Maybe one will be an active member, maybe not; average faith affiliation doesn't call for much more.

Listen to the words of a minister who spent time in this community with us in the early days, recently summing up his career in the ministry:

“You might laugh over these three episodes in my experience,” he said

“First, I suggested to the Deacons in my church that we have an orientation for new parents who wanted a child baptized--to give them background on what baptism meant. They were incredulous. They refused.

Then another time, I suggested to a prospective member that we meet a couple of times to talk about membership. He told me that he was very busy and if meeting was a requirement, he would not join. Knowing by this time, that the Deacons would not back me up, he joined the next Sunday.

And then, a couple came to me to talk about a marriage ceremony. I asked the groom to tell me a little about why a church wedding was important to him. His response was, "I don't discuss religion or politics with anyone.”

As David expresses it: “The vision of our church is to offer people the opportunity to give full attention to their spiritual lives by making a committed response to God's call to live as we were created to live.” Our community was designed with the thought that each person who lingered around here would, intentionally, be at some point on his or her own spiritual journey and that we would talk about these things amongst ourselves. Now and then after a time, perhaps an individual would consider and decide to become a member and make this officially her or his community. If not interested in a spiritual journey, one would most likely not choose to stay around the Church of the Covenant. Some of us have chosen to stay

around and this design of our founders is, at the least, something that we are aware, is at the heart of this church; for some of us, it is the central guidepost for our lives!

So we are encouraged to be mindful about our lives- our Inward Journey- which amounts to taking responsibility for our inner growth; our Outward Journey which in large part accounts for how we spend our time and resources, either synonymous with or beyond our vocation. Accountability is important to us, which simply means two things - our willingness to honestly share with others how we are doing with our spiritual practices and in our spiritual lives in general and our willingness to make ourselves available to others as they honestly share their journeys with us. As we work with our spiritual growth we bear in mind Mother Teresa's words: "We are not called to be successful, but rather to be faithful."

As Community and Covenant members, we engage consistently in practices which flesh out our commitment- acquainting ourselves with the Judeo-Christian heritage and getting to know Jesus and his extraordinary life, death and continued presence with us in Scripture; quiet, meditation, reflection, prayer; sharing from our personal resources of strength, time, money, energy; working with the sacredness of relationships between ourselves and God as well as developing, honoring and enjoying relationships with others, indeed with all of nature! Covenant members also keep each other apprized if they are having trouble with any point of our Covenant.

We have an annual, usually silent, retreat on the Saturday before Commitment Sunday; this year our retreat is Saturday, October 4. It is always a wonderful day. I encourage you to consider coming. I look forward to it! In an annual retreat several years ago, David prepared the following questions for us to work with, if we were

so inclined:

- Where am I now?
- Where do I want to be?
- What aspect of my faith- what practice or practices- do I need to deepen and strengthen?
- What do I need to celebrate?
- Where is God calling me?

Our journeys find us this very day at different points. Each of us comes from a unique background- our families in which we grew up are varied, as is our life experience. Some of us might describe our current journey as dynamic, changing and growing; some of us are reeling from set-backs we have suffered in our journey. Some of us are simply not interested in Christian growth, maybe because of shyness or life-long resistance to discussing matters of faith with others, so perhaps we take a second look; some of us are hard-pressed to locate a person that we feel comfortable talking to about matters of faith. Some of us may simply be in a static, frozen, or stuck state. Some of us have been on this journey for a while; others are newcomers, still getting acclimated to a new understanding of what 'church' is all about! I have been through most of these phases myself! To reflect upon our spiritual journey is a really good and helpful thing! Few of us are at exactly the same place but as we get to know each other and become more comfortable together, we find points at which we intersect and have a common sharing. Some of us need help to sound out, to discuss, to consider and sort through things! Some of us want to be helpful, to listen, to discuss, and to engage corporately. These weeks in September are an introspective and pensive time. We never really know for sure the outcome of our membership until Commitments are

made by individuals. Should there be no commitment, there will be no church!

Each of us is an important part of this community. As we say in Children Worship & Wonder, we have all the time we need here. We don't have to hurry. Some of us are ready and will be committing to membership for the year through September 2015. If you are one who is even just curious about membership, I would encourage you, sometime during this new church year, to take time to explore, at your own pace, one or more of the small groups which meet around here. Visitors are always welcome. There is also always the option to simply set a time to talk with someone you feel comfortable talking with, about things that are important to you- about your journey. We never know where such a step may lead. Readiness comes to some, but some of us may never be ready to take such a step. It takes all of us to make up the Church of the Covenant!

I know God is near me whether I am walking alone in our woods, cruising at 40,000 feet over the Atlantic, sitting on our screen porch on a cool fall morning, with our children in their room upstairs or here in our chapel with you. The older I become, the more of my mornings that are spent in prayer and meditation, the more I share life with this community, the more I realize that it is up to me how my life goes. In joy and in sorrow, in blessing or adversity- how I choose to work with whatever befalls me - with whatever comes my way - is a significant factor in my happiness, my contentment or the lack thereof. My choice is not always the best. My path is not always the right one. Just as in marriage we promise to love and cherish our loved one and thus set our course, so in our commitment to God as we come to know God through Jesus, we are setting our course. I am so grateful that my dear friend Debby Paul invited me to attend the Church of the Covenant that October Sunday in 1954! I still choose to be on my journey among this community.

The Church of the Covenant remains, for me, caught up in a great adventure!