

Sermon, April 12, 2015 / Rachel Wilson

Good Morning. The bulletin for today may indicate that you are going to hear a sermon. That is not true, so you can relieve your mind. I am speaking, but not preaching. The reason I am here is that David, our minister, has regularly been asking each Covenant Member to stand here, in time. He believes that we have something important to say as we share with you how Covenant membership makes a difference in our lives. So, you might say this is a test. I am the first. The very nature of what I am asked to do means that the pronoun "I" will be heard often. In my telling I do not want to sound vane nor proud. Rather, it is my desire to explain, as best I can, some of the giftedness I feel, because I am a Covenant Member.

It was thirteen years ago that I moved from First Christian Church to the Church of the Covenant. This was by no means a spur-of-the moment decision on my part. I had been a member of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ for my entire life, actively involved in all its manifestations. I had been a Director of Christian Education for seven years before I began teaching in the public schools of Lynchburg. Pulling up roots from my denomination was not easy although for some time I had known that I wanted to go deeper into my spiritual journey and I couldn't seem to find the nourishment I needed.

By no means was I unfamiliar with the Church of the Covenant for I had many connections with it. I had served on the staff of its Friday Coffee House for a number of years during the 60's and 70's, had attended regular Sunday worship for a period of three months in 1975. I had participated in some of the Schools for Christian Living that Bev Cosby led, and brought my grandchildren to Camp Kum Bah Yah. I knew that Covenant members tithed and had some disciplines that they had promised to observe. I knew people who were Covenant members.

I very much wanted to be in a quieter place than the traditional noisy sanctuary on any Sunday morning. I had been to worship here enough times to know that silence began when one entered the chapel. So, when David Edwards was called to be the minister at the Church of the Covenant, I made the decision that I had been toying with for months and joined this community. David had been my friend and my minister previously and I knew that he too was on a spiritual journey. It was a natural choice to decide to travel with him on "The Journey of a Lifetime".

Shortly after coming here I expressed my desire to be a Covenant member, not really knowing a great deal about what that meant yet feeling a pull to go in that direction. As I recall I attended one meeting and then on the second one I gave my spiritual autobiography. It was there that Dolly Cardwell became my sponsor. What a gift that was. Over a period of a year, she and I met regularly, usually for lunch where we talked about many things but always with the main thrust

centered on the meaning of Covenant Membership. I attended all Covenant meetings that year and then on September 1, 2003, I became a full-fledged Covenant member.

My journal for that date records, "So now I am committed to study the Bible daily as a resource of guidance, inspiration, and insight; to pray daily, giving adequate time to it; to give at least a tithe ... as an expression of God's total claim on my total life; to worship regularly; to be involved in a Mission Group; to try to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness in every relationship to indicate to the community if I am having difficulty in keeping this commitment."

I knew somehow that I had made the right decision. I cannot be sure whether the following words are mine or whether I read them but they convey how I feel about my Covenant membership. "I am nourished, aware, awake. There is a bond between members because we are together in the presence of the Spirit". They call forth the best in me as we worship together, try to make decisions for this community that show who we are, and share in so many ways. Covenant membership has changed my life. I shall attempt to describe some of the ways.

For many years, I thought that I should have some kind of personal devotional life. This practice changed frequently but usually it consisted of a brief reading from some inspirational book and perhaps a short prayer. Since I became a Covenant member this has changed gradually. Now, the most important and absolutely necessary beginning of each day is what I term "My Worship". I sit quietly in front of two windows from which I can view five mountains, some a part of the Blue Ridge, and miles of forests. I light my candle. Oftentimes, I am so awed at what I see that I hear myself say aloud, "God has made everything beautiful in its time".

In that sacred space I have watched mockingbirds mate, feed their young, and then teach them how to fly. I have seen God in the trembling of the trees, in budding flowers and growing grass. I have witnessed sunsets almost too beautiful to bear. In that spot I have pled with God, confessed, wept, laughed, sat silently. I have sung hymns and recited psalms that touch my heart, and pored over lectionary readings. I am fortunate that I do not have other things pushing me so I am able to spend an hour or even two at my worship each day. My journal writings reveal many of my joys and also many sorrows. My covenant to read, study, and pray has borne much good fruit.

Sharing worship, discussing the needs of the larger community as well as our own, making decisions, sometimes quite difficult ones, and just being with the Covenant members is and has always been a blessing for me. They have listened to me, encouraged me, given me broader visions. I was a charter member, you might say, of the mission group that started the Festival Center in the inner city. This wonderful place lasted seven years. It began with Saturday morning offerings for children and eventually offered daily, after-school activities. I was also

fortunate to enjoy friendships with several of the women from the neighborhood as we met for lunch on a monthly basis. I still keep in touch with some of them.

It was in this mission group that I first experienced formal accountability for covenants made. We had adopted our own set of disciplines when we established the group and one of these was that each person would give regular accountability reports about how he/she was doing with the disciplines. When I think of those times that it was my turn, I know that they made significant contributions to my spiritual journey. I was supported and challenged, all done in love. I was also given the opportunity to do the same for others and I knew that I was privileged.

The nurturing given to my spiritual life had its biggest impact as I dealt with the scary issue of suffering. You may know that I have had four back surgeries. The first two were successful in that they brought great relief and allowed me to live a reasonably pain-free time for about twelve years. When the pain began to return I knew I was hoping that God would help me with it. Each day I sang, "Lead me, lead me along the way, for if you lead me, I cannot stray. Lord, let me walk each day with thee, lead me, O Lord, lead me". I often paused after "Lord, let me walk".

Walking became more painful and I found myself begging God to heal me. I didn't like myself for praying this way. Again I read from my journal, "On Saturday night, in my misery, I did what I have proclaimed was against my beliefs about prayer. All night long, I begged God to lessen the pain. For a long time I had said that I would not be that direct in my petitions, rather, that I would ask only that God's will be done or that God's healing presence come to me. But on Saturday night I spoke directly of my want-to be without pain, or at the least, to be restored to the level I was on two months ago. I kept feeling some guilt at what I was asking and yet all the scriptures kept coming to my mind about asking, in faith".

I finally reached a point that I could not bear the intense pain so I had the third surgery. It did not succeed, did not do what the doctor and I had hoped for. Furthermore it damaged one leg permanently. It became necessary for me to use a cane, and there was only minimum pain relief.

Through the intervals between surgeries, most of the time several years, I was gradually able to move from desperation about my future to a deeper understanding of the meaning of suffering. I pored over the book of Job, yet high-lighted only one verse, "Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling". The pain worsened and a fourth surgery seemed my only hope but it, like the one before, did not succeed. For three months I wore a brace from under my arms to my waist.

One day I pulled a book from my shelves, *Job and the Mystery of Suffering* by Richard Rohr. I don't know how I acquired that book. It appeared to be new. I read the seven words written on the inside cover, "The wounded one is the gift giver". I could hardly put the book down.

I read Job again, but interspersed its chapters with Rohr's book. I struggled as I prayed but very gradually I came to an understanding that suffering is a necessary part of my life. Most of the time I am still in pain, some days are worse than others, and it may take me the rest of my life to be able to totally embrace it. But I have chosen to do so and in so doing I have found that I can have a full life. Each morning as I get out of bed I thank God for the night and then I pray that God will enable me to live that day according to God's will. As I rinse my face three times I do so in the names of God, of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit and I remember my baptism. When I eat breakfast I thank God for my food and for all those who have brought it to my table. Throughout my day I talk to God in silence, as I do household chores. I find that these habits help me be able to allow pain to be a big part of who I am. Covenant members have sustained me.

As some of you know, I am a person who talks much more than I listen. I am not proud of this and I want to change it. I believe that I have made improvements, but am not there. I think that our Covenant meetings have been an excellent place to work with this, especially when there are major decisions to be made. I want to listen for the wisdom that comes from others.

A final word about one more significant gift as a Covenant member; I am speaking of the gift of silence. It seems contradictory to use words at this point. Our silent retreats must be experienced in order to understand what I mean when I say that silence is a gift. Silence in worship is precious. The silence as we begin meetings, experience in Mission groups, the silence of a meditation walk. Silence opens me to God. Perhaps you have experienced the profound impact of silence when we are together in Sunday worship.

I suggest to you that what we have here is a loving gift from God. I need not search for the "pearl of great price". It is here, right here in this place. It is called Covenant membership. Some of you may be called to check it out. It is open to all. Don't just take my word for it. Speak to Vince Sawyer, or Barbara Holdren, to Dolly or Will Cardwell, to Kay or David Edwards, to Kay Hicks, or to Larry Farmer, the newest member. Speak to God about it.

So, this test is complete. I am thankful that I had this opportunity. As I conclude I want to pray with you, one of the prayers that I say each morning. It is from Psalm 139:

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it

completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it." Amen.