

Sermon for July 3, 2016

“Covenant Community: What does it mean to be called The Church?”

by: Christina Cosby

Scripture: 2 Kings 5:1-15; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27; Matthew 3:13-17, 28:19-20

Theme: Baptism, Covenant

Imagine with me, that you are in the grocery store. As you near the checkout line you run into an old friend. She/he has a grocery cart full of soda, potato chips, hamburgers, hotdogs,, and ice-cream. Before saying farewell, you remark, “it looks like you are going to have a weekend full of fun.”

Your reacquainted friend responds, “Yes, I am having a lot of friends over for a cookout. We rarely see each other anymore! ... Oh, by the way, you should come, everyone would be happy to see you as well.”

“You should come.” What sort of invitation is that?

Now, imagine this scene with me. You are sitting on the couch at home, watching television with your family, when the phone rings. You are hesitant to answer because you are sure it is just another telemarketer. Anyways you stand up and grab the phone. You are pleasantly surprised when you hear on the other end of the line a voice say, “ May I please speak to _____, this is Bob one of his/her old high school friends.”

He/She continues, “I am planning a forth of July cookout and I would love it if you and your family could attend.

That’s an invitation!

These two scenarios easily translate into our life of faith, and who we are as a church. Do we simply tell others that they can come? Or, do we genuinely invite them into our comradery? Yes, we may be quick to tell people, “You should come with me to church this Sunday.” But, what does it look like if we were to truly invite others to join us along the journey?

This joining is what covenant community is all about. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines covenant as a noun that means, “a formal or serious promise.” Dictionary.com adds to this by stating that covenant is, “a solemn agreement between members of a church to act together in harmony.”

Covenant for our community, lays the foundation for how we live our daily lives as individuals, in order that our communal life of faith may be enriched.

But, where does this idea of covenant originate? The Bible implies that covenant has existed since the beginning of time. God made early covenants to the chosen people. Mid-way through the book of Genesis, we read of the covenant God makes to Abraham, that he shall father many

nations. (Genesis 17:4) These promises that God makes to God's people continue with Noah and the rainbow (Genesis 9:4), and Moses with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-21), and Joshua, and Esther, and David. We could continue the unending list until we reach us, today.

This suggests that the Biblical definition of covenant is, "a conditional promise to humanity by God. These promises are full of conditions. "You must do this _____, in order to remain within God's loving fold." This blank could be filled in with 617 laws that we find within the scriptures of the Old Testament. Nonetheless, that is not the entire story. It doesn't end there.

God decided that God's love toward humanity was so great that it must reach beyond the chosen people of Israel to include those in far away lands. In addition, God realized that making conditional promises with humanity never worked out well. Human beings always fell short of the promises they meant to keep.

Therefore, God purposefully open the doors, and invited all people to come to trust in the amazing grace only God can grant. God sent an only Son into the world to walk among humanity—Jesus Christ. Jesus takes away the conditions one must adhere to in order to receive God's love. Now the invitation is open.

Nonetheless, God knew that people needed tangible ways to experience their faith. Up to this point that was all they knew. In the gospel of Matthew immediately following Jesus' birth, we read the story of Jesus' baptism. So Jesus went to the Jordan River to be baptized by John the Baptist. It is recorded that when Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan the heavens were open and a dove descended—another sign of God's covenant to God's beloved children.

We, not even Jesus, can enter into covenant relationship with God or one another without God first inviting us into relationship. For us Christians, we experience this through the waters of baptism. Martin Luther (father of the protestant reformation) notes, that baptism is The Word in water.¹ It is in these sacred moments, that one can tangibly feel the cool, cleansing water against his/her skin. This water symbolizes a new creation—the new life we are invited to enter into in Christ Jesus.

Baptism, therefore, is our well-thought out invitation on God's behalf to call each of us into community—a community formed on covenant with God. This covenant, however, no longer has conditions (such as we find in the Old Testament). Baptism is a sign that signifies God's covenantal promise—a promise that is being made anew each day. This promise is open to all with God's understanding that we will constantly fall short of God's grace. Nonetheless, God continually gives grace generously.

In our scripture from 2 Kings chapter 5 this morning we read the story of a wealthy commander named Naaman. Naaman has all that he needs, and little holds him back. However, there is one thing standing in the way of him reaching his full potential—a contagious skin disease. The smallest, weakest person he knows (a small captured slave girl from the land of Israel) informs

¹ Martin Luther. "The Large Catechism," *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Lutheran Church*. (Retrieved from: bookofconcord.org/lc-6-baptism.php on 01 July 2016)

him that she knows how he can rid the skin disease. She tells him that he must go to Israel and find the prophet Elisha. Namman and the King of Aram gather up chariots, gold, and silver to make the journey to go see this prophet. When they arrive Elisha simply sends a messenger, who tells Namman to go wash in the Jordan, so that he might become clean.

Now, Naaman is a man of power, in turn expects God to act in powerful ways. He becomes enraged at this suggestion, and even mocks Israel for their dirty waters they call holy. Words of wisdom, once again come from the small slave girl when she remarks, “Father, if the prophet had asked you to do something complicated you would have done it. How much more when all he says is wash and be clean.” (v.13)

Naaman, then goes to the Jordan with little expectations that this will work. Nevertheless, he washes in the dirty waters of the Jordan, and his skin returns to that like a small boy.

Baptism, for us, can be this way too. We wonder how an act so simple can change our lives of faith. For me, and I argue for all of us, baptism is a tangible way that allows us to feel God’s grace in a world that desperately needs it. This simple act of engaging a sense (the sense of touch), which is typically left out of our lives of faith is one of the most powerful we have.

It is through this invitation from God that we can feel, be washed, and are made clean that we are free to make commitments to God and one another. However, we must remember that God is the one that initiates these commitments—covenants.

It is this understanding of covenant that Gordon and Bev. Cosby had in mind when they returned home from World War II. Through their time overseas they realized that in times of turmoil traditional religion—simply going to church on Sunday morning—was not enough to sustain a person. Faith was the key to ensure that a person could withstand trials, challenges, and sufferings.

Faith, however, must be formed and fostered over long periods of time. For Gordon and Bev, this came through daily devotions first to God, and then to a community of faith. Hence, the Church of the Savior (in Washington D.C.) and Church of the Covenant (here, in Lynchburg) were formed.

The bookends of Matthew’s Gospel focus on the importance of baptism, which signifies its importance for the church today. These bookends also point towards the theme of the inward and outward journeys.

The Gospel open’s with the words, “come and be baptized” (an allusion we might equate to the inward journey of faith). In-turn the gospel writer concludes his work with these words, “Go, therefore, and make disciples baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (28:19)

Nonetheless, it is important to note that this command to go (the church today refers to as the Great Commission) doesn’t mean that we should force others to entertain our religious beliefs—it is a command to truly go. A going that takes the form of receiving. As we go forth into the

world, our job is to accept the hospitality of others—it is through this unique type of love that allows others to see the light of Christ in us.

This attests to the fact that faith is not about sitting comfortably in our chapel and waiting for others to come to us. It is an outward journey asking us to seek others where they are, and meet them there. Just as God has done for us.

This coming in through baptism and going out to baptize is simply a request to be relational. Not to create a homogeneous community, but to create an authentic community in which peoples of all upbringings and cultures are welcome. A place where all are invited!

This brings us to our Epistle lesson from 1 Corinthians chapter 12. We are the body of Christ Jesus in the world today. One body, which is made up of many members. The church is to be unified; yet it should not lose its diversity.

This is what and who the church is—this is what authentic covenant community is all about. We are joined in Christ Jesus to God through our baptism. This grants us the freedom to make commitments to God and one another.

In conclusion, it is the tangible signs and symbols of faith that openly invite us to be a part of God's family—such as through the sacrament of baptism. It is through this coming in and going out that The Church is formed. To be the church is to recognize that God opens the invitation before we are aware the party has been planned, and in turn we are to share this Good News with all who welcome us. This creates the modern body of Christ—a body that is unified but made up of many members.

Today we gather around this table, to celebrate the Eucharist—a time when we use ordinary bread and grape juice to palpably taste and see that the Lord, our God is good. As we break bread and share the cup know that God loves you. God through your baptism has washed you clean, calling you one of God's own, enabling you to go forth in love and service to the world. You are a unique member of the body of Christ (the church), and your presence enriches God's Kingdom here on Earth.

Remember, our opening scenario with our friends hosting cookouts? God is the friend, who a month before the party calls you personally. Inviting you and your family to come to the feast that has been prepared with you in mind. This invitation was not an after thought, but a forethought on God's behalf—YOU ARE INVITED, come to the table God has prepared to taste and see that God is good!

In the name of God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Amen.