

**Sermon, Dolly Cardwell**  
**July 24, 2016**

Will and I want to thank each of you who have been so faithfully praying for us and for our sweet granddaughter, Abby, now sixteen years old. She and her family have had a very rough year and a half, wrestling with Abby's mitochondrial disease and her epilepsy. We all wait as patiently as we can, for the trial-and-error discovery of medications to stabilize her epilepsy, to renew her health. We are grateful for the medical community in the Charlotte area who care for her and for her wonderful parents and older and younger sister, who are strong assistants and advocates for her. Abby loves our community and appreciates how much you mean to her grandparents. She speaks often of going upstairs to hear a story, of Kaye and of David. Abby is hanging in there although her body is weak after all she has been through; her spirit is amazing! She is content, rarely complains, and is cooperative for the most part in her care. She is a gift from God and an inspiration to us.

Paul's brief letter to the Colossians is often compared to Ephesians; both were written in the 50s AD or as we say now CE (Common Era). I listen carefully to these two little New Testament books, as they were written within 20 or 30 years of Jesus' life, death, and new life when little start-up communities appeared near where Jesus lived and preached and then more widely thanks to Paul; these early Christians were identified as 'followers of the Way'. This week's passage in chapter 2 begins with two verses which my Discipleship Study Bible points to as a summary of the whole letter. Read verses 6 and 7 from the bulletin. Abounding in thanksgiving! Just as the Colossians were, so are we, a grateful and thankful community, abounding in thanksgiving. We are cautioned about the distractions of 'the elemental spirits of the universe'. Bev Cosby used to speak in terms of the dominant culture, which always lies in wait to captivate us with its sparkly entrapments, causing distraction from the way Jesus calls us to live! We read: "The whole fullness of deity dwells in Christ, and in him, Christians of all time come to fullness through baptism in Jesus Christ, which makes all things clean and new; our original blessing and goodness, our very relationship with God is restored." This passage gives us insight into the concerns and the growth of a brand new, New Testament community. This is the good news of the gospel!

Although written 20 to 30 years later than Colossians and Ephesians, our Luke passage (11:1-13) captures an earlier time when Jesus is still with the disciples. Jesus often withdraws to pray in Luke and, when asked: "Lord, teach us to pray", Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Read verses 2-4 from the bulletin. I'd like to look more closely at verse 4. Jesus said: "When you pray say: Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us!" When we say these words to God or to one another, we are confessing. Confession is something with which we may not all be comfortable, but Jesus taught us to confess and to forgive! Confession is sharing our deepest need with God and with another in the community. This is a routine part of my daily inward journey time.

Not solely asking forgiveness for poor or bad choices we have made, confession sometimes means confronting our feeling of alienation from God or from each other. Confession can be a cry for help or simply reaching out to another because we don't have at hand adequate resources to deal with something that is crippling us. It can be asking, searching, or knocking! It can be confronting our loneliness. As we become more comfortable confessing our sin, our need, our brokenness to God, to another, to a mission group, to a friend or family member, we are drawn closer together. Healing and reconciliation begin; alienation is overcome. Confession gives the opportunity for the renewal of our covenant with God and with our fellow human beings; all things can become clean and new, just as in the celebration of baptism and the Eucharist.

It was here in this community that I learned about confession and went home to Waynesboro, called up my friend, Ann Reilly, who lived in the apartment over ours when I was a child, and told her that I had stolen her beautiful wooden donkey pin for my own, ten years earlier; even at a very young age, I loved pins! We don't talk much about confession here in our community. My friends tell me that I say too often: 'I'm sorry.' I say it when I make mistakes. One of our members in the early days, a sociology professor, used to say: "sin is mistake!" Well, sometimes, but sometimes sin is selfishness that runs deep in one's life, influencing the choices that one makes and potentially blocking one from really becoming a follower of Jesus Christ, indeed from ever finding her true self. I think the second part of verse 4 is interesting too: "for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." It seems almost assumed that Jesus disciples were experienced forgivers! I am not sure which is easier- confessing or forgiving. Jesus' prayer teaches us that we must do both!

I was baptized when I was a baby in Staunton, VA at Second Presbyterian Church, presented in the arms of parents who loved me and wanted all the best for me. Speaking of thanksgiving! I believe they knew that I had original blessing - as I believe every human individual has - and at the same time I had received the right to make choices- some sound and good, others not so good. When I joined the church I made my very own commitment to God through my First Presbyterian Church community over the mountain in Waynesboro and then about six years later through this community where I was pretty sure my life would be lived out. My covenant - my commitment - my special promise - is always first to God and then to you, my community!!

Now a little bit about what Covenant membership means to me:

I care deeply about what befalls us, how we evolve, and how we reflect the love and the will of the God who calls each of us to be here. This community has been life itself to me and to so many through the years. I have watched us wax and wane. I have ridden the breeze through the high times and I have plowed through the low times, even then finding refuge in this place, among these people. Because this community is so dear to me and makes my life stronger and more full of meaning, I cannot help but contribute to its continuation and its thriving. As a Covenant member I take ultimate responsibility

along with all other Covenant members, for this community, a commitment which I review each fall before renewing that commitment for another year. We know that every person here this morning is at some point on her or his spiritual journey; if not, you would probably not be here.

I invite each of you to consider what the next step in your journey might be and then, to work toward taking that step! Perhaps one or two or three of you might be ready to consider becoming a Community or a Covenant member of the Church of the Covenant. Or perhaps you might explore a mission group. Or maybe experience your first silent retreat; we have one on August 13. Our new church year begins on October 2. The day before, all those who will make commitments to this community and any others seriously considering membership, will participate in a silent retreat, we call it our commitment or recommitment retreat; there are always those attending who decide that it is not yet time for them to make a commitment; there are also others who discover that they want to more actively explore doing so. If you have interest I would urge you to talk with a Covenant member - there are ten of us who are active - and begin the dialogue to see whether you might be called to become a member of this community.

Ask questions of us. Ask us for history. Explore every aspect of what is going on here in our life together. Exploring is not committing. It is seeking, searching; it is being curious! I would like nothing more than to be a part of a little group of explorers who would like to know more about and to discuss how this community lives out its life. Some things might make us uncomfortable at first - like prayer, like baptism, like the nature of Jesus, the meaning of and the celebration of the Eucharist, like what the church and its purpose is to each of us - the joys, the mysteries and the challenges. We are enriched as we share our thoughts and feelings with one another. We are free to express ourselves, to ask questions, or to simply listen and contemplate what is heard.

We have scattered throughout our buildings some of the most enlightening books ever written on these subjects. Have you any curiosity about what makes this community tick? We are told in Scripture that the church is the Body of Christ in the world. Now there is an old fashioned term for you- the Body of Christ- but it's a Biblical term, a good one and it defines what we are called to be, as followers of Jesus! Let's talk about some of these things! And remember that every October, like clockwork, each of us reviews our commitment and decides whether we wish to renew it for another year. And yes, we have members who do not recommit from time to time, some still remaining in our community- often because of age or infirmity, but not always.

As a Covenant member, I feel that I am ever growing in my understanding of the gospel, mystery and all, and in my preparedness to give the reason for the hope that is within me. In about 60 CE, an apostle, possibly Peter, wrote in I Peter 3:15: "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

David Edwards strengthened our community considerably by helping us take more seriously our inward journeys; I think most of us are spending more time and finding more fulfillment in our inward journey time than ever before. We are each our own person, living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century yet drawn to this humble man called Jesus who said such amazing things and did such wonderful things that people are still following him. Individuals such as we and communities such as ours, are still devoted to him. Now I know I speak from the luxury of retirement and the blessing of good health. It is certainly different for career and working folks, for families raising children, for one who is a caregiver or one being cared for. But the spirit and sense of belonging to a community is common to us all, whatever our age and stage of life.

As a Covenant member, I am called to generosity- of my resources, of my energy, of my gifts, of my time. My faith includes the possibility of a call to give up my coat to another, to walk the second mile, to turn the other cheek, to forgive 70 times seven, indeed to lose my life that I might find it. A simple tithe of my money is easier than so much I might be called to do, yet I do have the freedom to choose how I will respond. If I am growing, my generosity should be growing! As a Covenant member in every relationship I seek to become a channel of hope and love to my fellow human beings. Remember that we review and renew or not, our commitment every year.

As a Covenant member, I participate in a mission group. This is a new discipline which we have recently embraced. I am a member of Chrysalis Interfaith Retreat Center mission group which meets the second and fourth Thursday afternoon of each month at 4:30 pm in the Lodge. We clean and do laundry, pray for our own spirit of and our mission of hospitality; we greet guests and keep our facility a welcoming comfortable place for guests to come. It is true that a large part of my accountability takes place within my mission group. We have disciplines in our mission group which include taking our turn to share an accountability report; my next report will be on August 11. Most of our mission groups meet weekly or every other week.

Covenant members meet only once a month and usually there are quite a few things to be discussed and so, although we used to have accountability reports at Covenant members meetings, we no longer do so. The Covenant membership of this community is the entity that keeps the church afloat, along with our Administrative Assistant, Bookkeeper, and Transition Team! As a covenant member I must make an effort to keep in communication with other covenant members, sharing with individuals or the community any rough spots or difficulties I may be having with the Covenant that we share, as well as my growth and my contentment with it. Contemporary speak: we maintain transparency. Remember that we review and renew, or not, our commitment every year.

It is so important to me that the Church of the Covenant remain an authentic Christian community which honors and searches the Bible, which is devoted to Jesus Christ, which

acknowledges the human experience of brokenness and alienation from God and each other, which looks to the coming of the kingdom of God. Our community must be real and honest. We must Even as we travel through this time without a pastor, we need to continue dialogue and to build up our fellowship with one another, abounding in thanksgiving! Wednesday morning study helps, mission groups help, fellowship hour helps, our personal devotional time helps, silent retreats help, worship helps. Protecting the authenticity of the Church of the Covenant as a church of Jesus Christ and not allowing our community to slide into merely a feel good, do good, humanistic community is of great importance to me and I hope to most of us. Christian community is a gift of grace, worth cherishing and protecting!

At the same time that we are a Christian community, we are open and welcoming to all people including those of all faiths, even of no faith. Our God has many names. My community reveals the truth and the grace of God to me. My community helps teach me how to follow Jesus. Together I think we are one of the many communities-of-light across the world that work for the coming of the Kingdom of God, when love, justice, peace and righteousness will prevail.

Let us pray: O God, our God, thank you for the abundance and the blessing that this community weaves into our lives. Give us ways to guard and protect this treasure you have given us, to keep it true to your word, to your unfolding purpose, even as we welcome and share it with all the world. Fill us with your love as we scatter from worship to be your hands and your feet in our troubled world!  
In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord we pray. Amen