

“The Covenant of Love”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor, Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 3/21/2021

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Ruth and I just celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary. I know we seem hardly old enough, but it's true: It's been 25 years since we took our vows for one another before our families, our community, our churches, and our God. It is not a promise easy to keep. I fail often, but we have found ways to work it out. “You fail?” some might query. “Sure. I fail.” Some may immediately think “infidelity.” Well, some may call it that. “Fidelity” is a heavy word. I wrote my vows in a song to Ruth 25 years ago, the night before we married; in fact I worked on them late into the night. I won't sing them today, but I will quote them:

*“As surely as the sun will rise, as surely as the moon will shine—
I will be by your side faithfully... I will be yours eternally... Ruthie, I love thee.
As surely as the snow is white, as surely as the candles give light—
I will be by your side faithfully... I will be yours eternally... Ruthie, I love thee.
I will love and honor you, and always to respect,
The greatest treasure, God has given me to protect,
I will be by your side faithfully... I will be yours eternally... Ruthie, I love thee.”*

If you think “fidelity” is simply staying faithful sexually, then I think you may have misunderstood the concept. God's own relationship with the Israelites from the Hebrew Scriptures tells us of a sacred covenant between God and the people that was not sexual, obviously. In Jeremiah 31 we read how God characterizes this relationship: “...a covenant that they broke, though I was their spouse, says the LORD.” God refers to it as a marriage, the covenant as relationship with one another based on vows, commitments. As Christians we many of us believe this too. We believe each human has the responsibility to acknowledge their own covenant with God and understand what that entails as they enter into relationship with Creator. As we are “Church of the Covenant,” I think for most all of us this is not light matter.

Much like the covenants of old, a covenant provides peace and security. Covenants were a way of survival. For example, you entered into a covenant with other tribes to avert war. This secured peace between your people and other peoples, but how does it work with God? Is it to avert war? No, not a physical war but it does secure peace in a spiritual sense. Internal peace: Peace of the mind, peace in one's heart, and these manifest naturally as peace within the body itself. Internal peace is real, as we all know, and we renewing a covenant with God helps provide the peace we seek. God's shalom.

So, what does such a covenant require? Well, we enter into public covenant with God as a community of individual choice the first Sunday of October each year. However, the personal covenant we make with God is ours alone to renew daily, not just annually—and to do so takes courage and faith. Just as it requires courage when making vows to your life partner, for we must be brave enough to think that our partner will return the same vows back to us in like manner – without rejection, then we must have faith

to step into this relationship with both feet. We cannot be ambivalent. We must be fully committed. Not one foot in and one foot out. We must be all in. This takes both courage and faith.

And, finally, what does such a covenant produce. It produces love and trust. When you commit yourself to someone or something fully, you are “entrusting” your life to them. And your life is everything, right? So, in order to do this daily, some say it requires trust. I say it requires faith, and over time, the covenant produces a great deal of solid trust. Eventually, it becomes difficult and in my opinion not necessary to distinguish between the two. The reality is simply that trust exudes from this kind of covenant. But I believe it is made even more pronounced because of the love that encircles it. Love abounds there within this covenant. I feel that you cannot give your life over to something that does not encompass love, even emanating that love everywhere—because in the end this is a covenant of love.

Our covenant is both with our creator, but if it includes the Creator it must include Creation too, right? Jesus taught us that to love God we must love others, including our own enemies, because God is love. You cannot say you love God and hate others; these acts are one in the same. In fact, you shouldn't ever have to say you love God because your actions towards others tell the world whether or not you love God. So, how much do we really love God? How much do we really honor the covenant we make with our Creator each day? Our deeds will tell the story.

Shalom