

Nov.15, 2015
Exodus 20:1-11; Mark 12: 28-34
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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Covenant

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

We are in the 5th week of a 6 week series that parallels the confirmation class' conversations. Last week we encountered the Hebrews being liberated from slavery in Egypt. God is the central character in this liberation, with Moses the human leader. Next they experience wandering in the wilderness, where the people struggle with the challenges and risks of freedom. There are times when some of them look longingly back toward Egypt. At least they had full bellies there.

At Mt. Sinai there is a reaffirmation of the covenant between God and the people - the Ten Commandments, which we've just heard the Junior Choir sing. In the original Hebrew in Exodus 20, these statements are not called mitvah - meaning commandment; they are simply called dabar - meaning word. Thus God spoke all these **words** to the people. God's words begin with this important remembrance: *I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* In Jewish tradition this is the first word. Later in the tradition these words come to be referred to as commandments.

About fifteen hundred years after Moses, someone asks Jesus of Nazareth about the 600+ mitvahs (commandments) of Jewish tradition. This person wants to know which is most important.

SERMON

Promises can be easy to make and hard to keep. Maybe you've heard a quip like this before. A man, late for a meeting, was desperate for a parking spot. He looked to heaven, "God if you get me a space, I'll ... go to church/synagogue/mosque/temple each week from now on." Upon looking down again, miraculously a spot was open. Looking back up, he said, "Never mind. I found one."

Figuring out how to live with ourselves, with one another and with the holy is a life long journey. It helps to bring that practice to consciousness, from time to time, not just when we desperately need a parking space. We do that in many settings of our lives.

Some of us are involved in education - as a teacher, a student or a parent. So I suspect some of us have experience with "Classroom Covenants" or a school's "Code of Conduct." Others of us who live in condo or housing associations have agreements we live by in those settings. When we get married we make promises to the other person. In our congregation we have a Church Covenant that we use when new members join, in which we make promises to one another and God about our life together. All of these are covenants.

flowing into their veins,

(A Poetic Kind of Place, 9/28/14)

At the request of some of you, in preparation for our congregation's 300th anniversary in 2017, we are reconsidering our Church Covenant, which was last revised in the 1990s. Last Sunday after church some of us gathered for conversation about our church covenant. One of the questions raised - how relevant to the 21st century is the word covenant?

Indeed, covenant is not a common word. It doesn't just roll off the tongue in casual conversation. However, it is a significant word that is embedded deeply in our congregational heritage. It comes from the same root as convene - to come together. A covenant is an agreement between those who have come together for a common purpose.

When I looked up synonyms for covenant, the one that I think works best for a church covenant is "trust." It is the trust we make with one another and with God. That's the heart of the Mt. Sinai covenant - the Ten Commandments - that we heard the children sing earlier. They are trusted words between God and the people to guide their life together.

In a poem by Andrew King called *The Ten Words*, he includes this stanza,

*words that are the beating heart
of a covenant,
words of requirement,
words that are gift,
words that are bones
in the body of a people,
words that are blood*

Covenants at their best are not dry, but dynamic, not legalist, but life giving. Otherwise why would we want to make such promises?

Covenants are not banal, they are "the bones of the people." I like that image. Covenants give us structure and make it possible for us to be about the ministries to which we are called.

There are two sections to the Ten Commandments. The first words of the covenant are about loving God and the latter are about loving neighbor. Then there is a hinge word that ties the two sections together. This word is about loving God, loving neighbor and loving self. Jesus brings us right to this hinge commandment when he responds to the scribe saying we should love God and love neighbor as ourself.

So what is that hinge word, that hinge commandment? It's the one that a group of church school teachers once told me they find the hardest to live by. It's Remembering the Sabbath. That means re-member-ing, bringing Sabbath to life.

At its roots Sabbath is primarily about rest. If we put it in short form like many of the other commandments it would be "Do Not Work." In contemporary language we might say, "Slow down, listen to your life, pay attention to the presence of God, delight in others around you." This is not a rule so much as it is a gift. It is a set

aside time to love God, love neighbor, and love self. It is as important as any of the other words for creating a healthy and wholesome life and community.

The world needs Sabbath!
We need Sabbath days,
Sabbath moments,
and Sabbath practices.

It was a wonderful time yesterday at the Blessing of the “Labyrinth in the Woods in Honor of Susan Fitzgerald.” It was a small gathering of Susan’s family, the Labyrinth Tenders and the joint task force of church and land trust folk who have worked on the labyrinth project. The labyrinth is a Sabbath practice that focuses our attention on loving God, loving neighbor, loving self. An outdoor labyrinth reminds us that we are also to love creation.

It was wonderful to share the time with Susan and to thank her for her vision to create an outdoor labyrinth in this community. It also warmed my heart to see the ways we have worked together with the Brunswick Topsham Land Trust to provide this resource for the wider community. It has been a great collaboration. This project flows out of our congregation’s covenant to “Join in reaching out together in service to humanity and to celebrate God’s love and joy, found in each of us and all of us.”

Over the centuries our church covenant has gotten shorter. In the bulletin you will see our present covenant.

First Parish Church Covenant

*We promise to come together
to share in the worship of a living God
and in the celebration of the sacraments
given to us by Christ;
to walk together as disciples of Jesus,
proclaiming his reign in our lives now and
forever;
to sustain one another in all life’s
challenges, joys, and sorrows through
prayer, love, and fellowship;
to join in reaching out together in service
to humanity;
and to celebrate God’s love and joy,
found in each of us and in all of us.*

In conversations there has been some talk about a shorter covenant – one that we might be able to recall. A sample is the covenant from Micah 6:8.

*Do justice, love kindness,
walk humbly with God.*

If you have thoughts to share about this revision project, you can contact the team at fpcovenant@gmail.com .

As we enter into our silence today, let’s share together in saying our covenant.