

Spiritual Glue
August 9, 2015
Hebrews 8:6-13 (The Message)

This morning's Bible reading comes from the eighth chapter of the book of Hebrews. It is an account of covenants; more specifically, it introduces something often called the new covenant.

Listen for God's love of God's people, and pay close attention to how it evolves over time.

But Jesus' priestly work far surpasses what these other priests do, since he's working from a far better plan. If the first plan - the old covenant - had worked out, a second wouldn't have been needed.

But we know the first was found wanting, because God said, Heads up! The days are coming when I'll set up a new plan for dealing with Israel and Judah. I'll throw out the old plan I set up with their ancestors when I led them by the hand out of Egypt. They didn't keep their part of the bargain, so I looked away and let it go.

This new plan I'm making with Israel isn't going to be written on paper, isn't going to be chiseled in stone; This time I'm writing out the plan in them, carving it on the lining of their hearts. I'll be their God, they'll be my people.

They won't go to school to learn about me, or buy a book called God in Five Easy Lessons. They'll all get to know me firsthand, the little and the big, the small and the great.

They'll get to know me by being kindly forgiven, with the slate of their sins forever wiped clean. By coming up with a new plan, a new covenant between God and his people, God put the old plan on the shelf. And there it stays, gathering dust.

May God bless the reading and hearing of these wise words, and let us pray. Covenant making and covenant keeping God, remind us that we your people are in covenant with you and that we have chosen to live in covenant with one another. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

We are a part of the United Church of Christ, a tradition that boldly proclaims “our faith is 2,000 years old but our thinking is not.”¹ This tradition – our denomination – is a network of around 5,000 congregations and nearly 1 million members.²

We also claim to be

- a multiracial and multicultural church³, and
- a church that emphasizes covenant⁴.

Let me slow down here . . . Before I can even comment on whether or not we have achieved or at least are working toward these ideals, I need to be sure we are on the same page about what they are.

The C-word is one of those churchy words that is often used but rarely explained. Covenant is a biblical term.

This morning’s reading jumps right in the deep end assuming you know about covenant and that this new covenant will shake up your perspective of how God relates to God’s people.

Covenant is an incredibly common concept in the First Testament, which we often call the Hebrew Scriptures. In fact, some scholars go as far as suggesting it is the “single most overriding theme” of the first thirty-nine books of our Bible. In your English language Bible the word covenant appears over 300 times over the course of the First Testament.⁵

Covenant is an important concept in the Second Testament or New Testament as well, although the word doesn’t appear nearly as often. In fact, you will find it in your English language Bible around 30 times and nearly a quarter of those uses will be quotations of passages from the Hebrew Scriptures.⁶ It occurs most often in the book of Hebrews, which is one reason I selected this morning’s Scripture passage from among so many options.

¹ UCC. “Who We Are.” <http://www.ucc.org/about-us_who-we-are>

² UCC. “About Us.” <<http://www.ucc.org/about>>

³ UCC. “Multicultural and Multiraical.” <http://www.ucc.org/men_multiracial-and-multicultural>

⁴ Charles L. Wildman. “Covenant in the UCC.” <http://www.ctucc.org/news/20110923_ct1109_clw_covenant.html>

⁵ Jane Fidler Hoffman. *Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ* (United Church Press, 2008), p.17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.23-28.

In these many experiences of biblical covenant, God covenants or enters into agreements with God's people. "Covenant is a more comprehensive and less legally defined relationship than a contract."⁷

Through covenant, God invites God's people into new relationships with God. By accepting, people become partners with God. By accepting, God self-limits Godself in order to make room for us and to be faithful to the terms of the covenant.

This is just the tip of the iceberg, but should be enough to clue you in to the biblical significance of covenant . . . Jumping ahead a few thousand years to our world, we now rely heavily on this term in the United Church of Christ. Our polity – our system of governance – our unique way of being the church is Congregational. It is one in which we have considerable autonomy as a local congregation to do things our own way yet do so in recognition that we are in covenant with all who comprise our denomination.

Frankly I find myself in far more conversations about our autonomy than covenant. We pride ourselves in having great latitude for how we do ministry and mission here at Fort Myers Congregational UCC. We appreciate that we do not exist in a top down style of being church whereby we have to do something because someone or some group beyond the local church said we must. That is not a part of our story.

Our local autonomy works so well because it exists alongside our covenant. In the United Church of Christ we have long talked of how we related as covenant, but did not include the actual word in our Constitution until the revision in the year 2000.⁸ Our current covenantal agreement means that we are called to "honor and respect" the work of all of the many various expressions of our denomination and to "seek to walk together in all God's ways."⁹ We never think of ourselves alone but remember we are in relationship with the nearly one million folks who comprise our tradition today.

Practically speaking, covenant connects us to people and to resources. We think of the ministry of our new Conference Minister, the Rev. John Vertigan, including his time with us as a guest preacher earlier this year. We think also of the gift of a national search and call process that our

⁷ Wolfgang Roth and Rosemary Radford Reuther. *The Liberating Bond: Covenants – Biblical and Contemporary* (Friendship Press, 1978), p.23 cited in Hoffman, p.62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.38-39.

⁹ "Article 3: Covenantal Relationships" in the United Church of Christ Constitution
<http://www.ucc.org/ucc_constitution_and_bylaws>

Pastoral Search Committee is beginning to work with now as they discern who God is calling to be the next settled pastor in this congregation.

Covenant means we are in partnership. It means we commit to relationship despite our differences.

Covenant means we not only get, but also give to the wider church. In this way many here have, are, or will devote energy and efforts to specific causes. Today, we have been lifting up the issue of racial justice because of covenant. A group of leaders within our denomination has been meeting regularly with our now recently retired General Minister and President Geoffrey Black. They called on us and on all churches to lift up issues of racial justice today.

One year ago today Mike Brown was killed. Before that day, I had never heard of Ferguson.

One year ago I was here with you for a month as your visiting preacher. I touched on many themes, but not on racial justice.

Over the last 365 days I have learned a lot about the reality of racism in America today. I have learned a great deal about specific racial injustices. And, I have been reminded again and again that we are called to do something about this problem.

I started my sermon this morning with some language that I wish to return to now. I said that we – the United Church of Christ – claim to be a multiracial and multicultural church. At present this is more of an aspirational remark than a present reality. Just a few weeks ago the Pew Research Center reported that 89% of the members of our denomination are white.¹⁰

So, we have an aspiration to change that as a denomination. A similar aspiration is present here in our purpose statement when we use the word “inclusive” as we strive to grow our diversity in race as well as other areas from where it is today to where we believe we are called to go in the future.

Thankfully few if any of us think of ourselves as being racist. We also tend to think of our denomination and other denominations like ours within Mainline Protestantism to have moved beyond any and all racist

¹⁰ Greg Smith. “Mainline: Lacking Racial Diversity.”

<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2015/07/30/mainline-lacking-racial-diversity/>>

thinking and behavior. Is this already a reality or another aspirational statement?

Sociologist Bradley Wright recently conducted research aimed at determining if American churches treat all potential newcomers the same or if those of certain races and ethnicities are treated differently. His team of researchers sent e-mails to over 3,000 congregations (about 1% of all US congregations) from fictitious people claiming they were moving into the area and seeking a new church. The e-mails were identical, but each was sent from one of four “names” that people tend to associate with specific racial groups: white, black, Hispanic and Asian American.¹¹

The results are disturbing. Overall

- churches responded to only 6 out of every 10 e-mails they received (59%);¹²
- response rates were far from equal across racial lines - for every 100 churches responding to letters from the white names, 93 responded to the black and Hispanic names, and 85 responded Asian American names.¹³

And, even more disturbing, the group of churches that showed the highest rate of implicit racial bias was Mainline Protestant – a group that includes our denomination.

Friends, the truth is this: we have work to do. And some of that work, including our efforts for racial justice, is too big for us to do alone.

So, as we recommit to this work

- Help us to remember that within our own tradition – the United Church of Christ – covenant is the glue that holds us all together.¹⁴
- And, help us to remember the new covenant found in this morning’s Scripture reading: God, you are our God and we are your people.

Amen.

¹¹ Greg Smith. “Racism: A Mainline Reality.” <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2015/07/27/racism-a-mainline-reality/>>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Fiesler, p.38.