

“Living in Faithfulness”

Genesis 17.1–7, 15–16

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 8 March 2009

Covenants are amazing things that establish and formalize bonds between people and God. (God's covenants are kind of like the Gorilla Glue of divine love.) And some of these love pacts last for thousands of years. Think of it: the covenant Abraham made with God is still in force for Jews around the world, and it is in force for Christians as inheritors of the covenant through Christ.¹ Four thousand years is a long time for a loving relationship to last.

And covenants have been a central aspect in the life of our Congregational tradition. “We covenant with the Lord and one another and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walke together in all his waies, according as he is pleased to reveale himself unto us in his blessed word of truth.” Those are the words that members of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts, said together as they formed a church in 1629.

That covenant – or promise – expresses beautifully some of what we still treasure in the United Church of Christ, some 380 years after our Puritan forbears formulated its words. The Salem Covenant embodies the idea of pilgrimage or faith journey and puts it into the context of community. We “bynd our selves” together and promise to “walke together in all” God's ways. And we don't just fall back on a given doctrine or the creeds of fourth-century bishops. We look for the ways God is revealing herself here and now. Or as Ron Buford put it when he developed the identity campaign for the UCC, “God is still speaking.”

This morning we welcome a dozen people as the newest members of Plymouth, which is always a joyous occasion! Paul Tillich wrote that “We are only a world though a community of men [and women]. And we can discover our souls only through the mirror of those who look at us. There is no depth of life without the depth of the common life.”² So, what do we see reflected in this congregation? What do we see in our *common* life when we hold a mirror up to ourselves?

We've been growing steadily and now have over 600 members, but numerical growth is only part of the story. My perception is that we are growing in faithfulness as well. I hope that through its various ministries, Plymouth is able to help you deepen and nourish your faith. For some of you, it's studying in the adult ed. program or helping our kids learn in the youth ed. program that you find a source of faithful living. Others of us might have plugged into a small group like the healing ministry or the Celtic spirituality group. You might even find worship enlightening or inspiring! Maybe you receive care from our parish nursing program or our Calling/Caring ministry. Maybe you've received a meal after you or a family member has been ill: a meal prepared by someone who cared. Perhaps you saw me or Sharon in the ER when an ambulance brought you in or you remember our presence in the moments after the death of a loved one. Maybe you're someone who shares your gift of music in one of our choirs or ensembles. Or perhaps you find one of our eight (count 'em) fellowship groups a place to connect. We are incredibly fortunate to have such a wide array of possibilities at Plymouth!

¹ see Galatians 3.7 & 3.17

² Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, (NY: Scribners, 1940).

“Faith” wrote Tillich, “is real only in the community of faith.”³ In other words, true faith cannot exist as an abstract concept, nor can it exist in the vacuum of radical individualism.

Those of you who were here on Ash Wednesday heard me quote a writer who recently commented, “Faith is not something you **have**; it is something you **do**.”⁴ So, for some of us, deepening our faith involves giving, receiving, or both. There are seasons of our lives in which we need to be the recipient of the care of another, and there are different times when we need to be the giver. There is a dance that we do throughout our lives with those two partners: giving and receiving.

I want to focus, though, on an aspect of our experience of membership at Plymouth, namely, covenant. (And I don’t say this to exclude folks who are not yet members! But covenants – divine love pacts – are really important!) How many of you are members of this congregation? And how many of you remember the covenant you made when you joined this congregation? (I know...that’s like asking a married person if they remember the precise words of their wedding vows.) Well, here are the words of our new member covenant, which are part of Plymouth’s constitution, and I think it’s good to remind ourselves every now and again of what we’ve promised to God and to each other that we would do: “In the presence of God and these witnesses, I give myself unreservedly to God’s service and take this to be my church. Ever mindful of the welfare of my brother and sister members, I promise to walk with them in faithfulness and Christian love. I promise, so far as I am able, to attend the services of this church, observe its sacraments, support its benevolences and endeavor to make it a fruitful body of Christian people.”

There are essentially eight promises that each of us have made as we became members:

1. **I give myself unreservedly to God’s service.** (We give our very lives to do God’s work in the world: no holds barred. Maybe it means that going outside my comfort zone.)
2. **I take this to be my church.** (This church doesn’t belong to a far-away diocese or the Vatican...it’s ours...We’re full stake-holders with influence and responsibilities.)
3. **I will be ever-mindful of my fellow members’ welfare.** (We express our care for other members in tangible ways, whether by praying for them, visiting, making a meal, or writing a note.)
4. **I will walk with them in faithfulness and love.** (We’re each a part of this community, journeying together with others on a pilgrimage of faith and love.)
5. **I promise to attend the services of this church.** (This is a serious one, perhaps best summed up by Peter Gomes a few years ago when he said that the most important reason for you to be in church may not be because **you** derive something earth-moving each Sunday, but rather it is because of what you bring to someone else by your very presence. Look around and think what a different experience this would be in an empty church!)
6. **I will observe its sacraments.** (We enter a covenant to support a person being baptized, whether an infant or an adult. And when we receive communion, we do it with a sense of authenticity and a sense of awe.)

³ Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith*. (NY: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 117.

⁴ Christian Wiman in *The Christian Century*, Feb. 24, 2009.

7. **I will support its benevolences.** (We pledge financially to the church to the full extent of our ability. Where our treasure is, there our hearts will be also.)
8. **I will help make a fruitful body of Christian people.** (We participate in the life of this church by giving generously of our time and our talents, and we invite people who need a church home to join us.)

So, let me be a mirror for you and pose the question: How are you doing at keeping your membership covenant faithfully? I'm not implying that any of us does it perfectly or that perfection should be our goal, but this is an opportunity for you to reflect on how you're doing with keeping each of those eight promises you've made as a part of Plymouth. Which ones seem easy to you, and which are the ones you struggle with?



I'm not going to sugar-coat this: **ours is not a low-commitment faith.** For years, many mainline Protestant churches have failed to demand very much of their members, whether it is in terms of their participation in the life of the church, their financial support of the mission and ministry of the church, or taking risks for their faith. (Maybe that is what "giving myself unreservedly to God's service" entails.) In short, some churches have not asked their members to take their covenant seriously.

If you're a member of Plymouth, you have been asked step up your commitment over the last few years, and most of you have responded faithfully. You have been asked to volunteer for Homelessness Prevention or help in the nursery or prepare coffee hour or organize a yard sale or any number of other things. And the funny thing is that the more you give, the more you get back.

While I was serving in conference ministry in Connecticut I felt a little disconnected from my home church, since I was usually out preaching in other UCC churches around the state three Sundays each month. And by serving on the local church stewardship committee and helping with the big stewardship brunch, I developed a rule of thumb: that you never really feel like a full-fledged member until you've worked in the kitchen.

You've also been asked to step up and give sacrificially to provide for building renovation and expansion. Those of you who have been members of this church for 15 or 20 or 30 or more years have been enjoying the sacrificial work of the Plymouth members who built this edifice in the late 1950s, and now it's your turn to repay those Old Germans by providing the infrastructure for Plymouth for the next 30 or 40 years, just like they did. And those of you who have just arrived will also be asked to give sacrificially in our current capital campaign, because you are getting to enjoy our new, accessible sanctuary (without the benefit of the old orange carpet and the dead acoustics), our killer adult ed. and choir room, and even the gorgeous gallery down to the West Wing.

So, when a capital campaign volunteer calls and asks for your help, please think about this: *You have committed yourself unreservedly to God's service.* And when you are asked to give sacrificially, please think about this: *You have committed yourself unreservedly to God's service.* The stakes of this campaign are very high. We need to work together to help ensure that we are able to continue the vital mission and ministry of this congregation in Fort Collins and beyond.

Did you know that last year, our mission and outreach giving through the UCC was our largest ever? Together, we gave more than \$50,000 (just through the denomination)...more than 10 percent of our operating budget. We are right on target, so let's keep going! In our culture, we often consider money "a private matter," but we at Plymouth are doing a pretty good job of making our money work for the wider community. And I'll be happy to stop talking about money when there are no more hungry

mouths to feed, no more injustices to correct, no more broken relationships to mend, and no more spiritual voids to fill. Until then, you'll have to deal with me and my mirror.

Your commitment and your service are absolutely essential to keeping this congregation vital. Yes, staff folks are important, but a large part of our work involves inspiring and organizing the efforts of our members.

You may find some of what I've said this morning challenging or even mildly annoying. And that's fine. Part of my call as your senior minister is to "afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted." But at the same time as I challenge you to keep your covenants faithfully, I also want to commend so many of you on what you are doing here at Plymouth.

Because of you keeping your covenant, a teen restorative justice program and Alcoholics Anonymous and developmentally disabled adults from Foothills Gateway have a place to meet. *Because of you keeping your covenant*, we support the Geller Center and the Interfaith Council. *Because of you keeping your covenant*, about 50 new members each year find a sense of spiritual rootedness and home here at Plymouth. *Because of you keeping your covenant*, Plymouth's voice for justice is heard throughout northern Colorado.

God is absolutely faithful in keeping covenant with us. May we strive for faithfulness as God's partners.

Amen.