

“A New Covenant”

Jeremiah 31.31–34

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 4 April 03

Many times, when I am celebrating communion, particularly at our 8:20 service, I will offer these words when I serve the wine: “the cup of the new covenant,” which reiterate the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood.”¹

The prophet Jeremiah talks about this upcoming new covenant with Israel and Judah, but it doesn’t get mentioned again at all in the Hebrew Bible, but we do find the theme getting picked up by the writer of Luke’s gospel and by Paul.

We’ve heard a lot about these covenants in the lectionary readings over the last month or so: the covenant God made with Noah, the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, the Sinai Covenant (or the Ten Commandments), and now this new covenant.

But this one is kind of squishy and amorphous: it’s not a clear mandate from God that she won’t flood the earth and wipe out humanity again, or that he is going to make great nations from one family, or even a set of codes etched on stone tablets. God is saying, through Jeremiah, that this new covenant is going to be an internal agreement: written on the hearts of God’s people.

So, how do you feel about that? It’s not exactly a water-tight directive, is it? Does that make you feel unsure of what God is asking of you? Do you know right away what this internal covenant with God entails? Do you like a little bit of ‘wobble room’ in your covenant with God? What is it that God has written on *your* heart?

If you examine the series of covenants from a developmental perspective, the Torah is fairly definite. It’s easier to have covenants written down somewhere than it is to discern what God has written on our hearts—that requires greater development. It’s analogous to steps in the development of children and adults: younger children need clear, strong boundaries; adolescents need to have some latitude; and mature adults need fewer fixed rules.

Look at the way different religious traditions or Christian denominations operate: some are very rigid (functioning on the basis of fear and intimidation) and others are more fluid, allowing for mature persons of faith to operate in response to God’s calling. (I’m going to hazard a guess that the judge who wanted to post the Ten Commandments in public buildings was not a member of a UCC congregation.)

Covenants are an integral part of the Jewish and Christian traditions, and also play a central role in our life in the Congregational tradition of the United Church of Christ. One of the earliest political covenants in our nation was, of course, the Mayflower Compact, and the second was the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, written by the Congregational Churches in Windsor, Hartford, and Wethersfield, forming the first written constitution in the Western Hemisphere.

In terms of religious covenants, though, one that has been in use in our churches since 1629, comes from the Salem Church. (*The Tabernacle Congregational Church in Salem is still a member of the UCC, by the way.*) It’s very simple: “We covenant with the Lord, and one with an other 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.”

¹ Luke 22.20 and I Corinthians 11.25

It's beauty is in its simplicity: We walk together in God's ways and we continue to listen to the way God reveals God's self. Those canny Puritans knew something that a lot of Christians today don't: that faith is not static, that God continues to be operative in our lives, and that God has written a new covenant not on stone tablets, but on our hearts.

Some churches say the Apostles' or Nicene Creed every week as part of their worship. But in our tradition we see creeds as historic testimonies of faith, not as tests of faith. Our Congregational tradition has underscored the idea that we, as persons of faith, ought to be about the business of discernment, rather than thinking and acting lock-step. Our own Plymouth Church constitution speaks clearly on this issue: "Members shall have the undisturbed right to follow the world of God according to the dictates of their own conscience, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

Another really important idea we can derive from Jeremiah's prophecy is that God can continue to write new things on the hearts of people. The Ten Commandments are fairly fixed, but what if God is calling us to "do a new thing?"² And what if God wants to write different teachings on the hearts of different people?

God may write a message of acting for social justice on the heart of a UCC member, engaging contemplative prayer on the heart of a Roman Catholic, preserving tradition on the heart of an Orthodox Jew, practicing piety on a Muslim's heart, and praying for the world on the heart of a Tibetan Buddhist.

We hem God in and imagine a very small deity when we think that God stopped operating in human history with Noah or Abraham and Sarah or Moses or Jeremiah or even Jesus. Our God is not a small God.

So, what has God written on your heart? And how do you know that it's God's handwriting, not the calligraphy of your superego or the culture in which you've been raised?

Different people will tell you different standards for "divine handwriting analysis." The great French Jesuit and paleontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, says that "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." I don't think he's talking about superficial happiness, but rather the deep feeling of infinite connection and love that comes with the knowledge of God.

William James, the philosopher and psychologist put it in deeply individualistic terms: "Seek out that which makes you feel most deeply and vitally alive...the inner voice which says, 'This is the real me.'" That very well may be one way to discern where God is calling you, but it's not enough all by itself.

For my part, I'd ask whether there is also deep congruence between what is written on your heart and the life and teachings of Jesus. (I'm making an intentional distinction between the flesh-and-blood Jesus and the experience of the early church, including Paul the apostle.) What do you think was written on Jesus' heart:

- when he said that the Sabbath was made for humankind, and not vice versa?
- when he touched and cured a ritually unclean woman, who had been hemorrhaging?
- when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple?

Jesus replacee the system of ritual purity (part of an earlier covenant) with the deep way of compassion, which forms the nucleus of the new covenant. It is the covenant of compassion we enter every time we come to the communion table.

² cf. Isaiah 43.10

You may find that God is calling you to go places you'd rather not be—pushing you beyond the limits of your comfort zone. I am not an activist by nature, but I have felt obliged to speak out against the war we are waging against Iraq. (And, by the way, that hardly makes me un-American, nor does it in any way diminish my support for the women and men in our Armed Services.) And I will continue to do so, even though it undoubtedly offends some people, and causes others to struggle with what I say. (And struggle is an okay, if not a comfortable, place to be.)

The way I perceive speaking for peace is as something God has written on my heart. It isn't an action I always *want* to take; it's something I feel I *have* to do. And it's what I think Jesus (the flesh-and-blood person) would be doing, were he in our midst. And I will keep on praying for wisdom and discernment as I try to detect the loops and ligatures of God's handwriting. And I will continue to voice what I perceive as the way God is leading us as a people.

So, as we gather around the communion table, and as you go through the routine of your life in the coming week, I would ask you to consider carefully the questions: *what has God written on your heart, and how can you tell it's God's handwriting?*

Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed Jeremiah's mantle when he said that "What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us."
Amen.