

“Remembering Our Commitments”

Genesis 9.8–17

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 9 March 2003

I wonder over course of our lives, how many commitments we make. We make some very big ones: marriage is one that springs to mind for most of us. But we make a lot of little ones, too, as when we commit to a discipline during Lent. And the big ones are often marked by covenants, contracts between three parties: two human and one divine. When we celebrate a marriage in the church, we acknowledge that it is the wedding of two persons, but that God, too, is present in the act of covenanting. When we receive new members into the church and when we celebrate a baptism, we often ask members of the congregation to enter into a covenant with God and the person being baptized or joining the church; if an infant is baptized, the parents make promises to guide and nurture their child in the Christian faith. It’s a multiparty agreement that includes God.

Sometimes these covenants are codified, written down, recorded in some way, and at other times our commitments are tacit agreements that we make about the way we live. In the life of the church, we have many occasions for formal covenanting, but we also make commitments that are not quite so formal. Some of our commitments become traditions, rather than Holy Writ (though you can make a strong argument that some commitments became accepted traditions that were handed down from generation to generation orally, and then became accepted as scripture).

One of the non-codified traditions in our UCC heritage, especially in the Congregational strand of our denomination, is a strong commitment to social justice. Certainly, one can point to the Hebrew social prophets and find powerful testimony for social justice spoken by Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Jesus. Those texts, of course, are available to all Christians, but we in the UCC tend to give them more weight than virtually all of our evangelical brothers and sisters. Why is that?

Some of it derives from the emphasis of our Pilgrim and Puritan forbears in taking the Old Testament seriously. In fact, a style of Puritan political sermon was called the *Jeremiad*, which occasionally speaks of doom and gloom, but also speaks of the need for revitalization and reform. One historian in a book called *The American Jeremiad*, writes that the Puritans “meant to convey the dual nature of their calling, as practical and as spiritual guides, and to suggest that...theology was wedded to politics and politics to the progress of the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> So, our engagement in politics is nothing new at all, though unlike our Puritan forbears, we certainly avoid a state church. (The Congregational Church was not disestablished in several New England states until the 1820s.)

A major watershed in our Congregational history came in 1839 in an event made popular by the Steven Spielberg film, *Amistad*. Unfortunately, Spielberg was less concerned about history and more about dramatic storyline, so he failed to include anything about the critical role of 19th century Congregationalists in the celebrated case. Here is a brief rundown of what happened:

In 1839 a Spanish slave ship, in violation of international law, transported captives from West Africa to Cuba. (The international slave trade had been banned several years before.) In Havana, some of the Mendi captives were sold into slavery and others were transshipped, to be sold in other places. One of these small boats was called

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<sup>1</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, (Madison, 1978), p. xiv.

*La Amistad* (ironically meaning *friendship* in Spanish). The Mendi, under the leadership of Sengbe Pieh, mutinied, taking over the ship, killing several of the crew. They instructed their Spanish captors to sail east, back to Africa, which the crew did during daylight hours, but at night, they sailed back west, and all the time the Gulf Stream was pushing them farther north along the east coast of the United States. Ultimately, the ship was seen and boarded by the U.S. Coast Guard off Montauk Point, at the end of Long Island, and towed into New London, Connecticut, where those fleeing aboard the *Amistad* were arrested and imprisoned in New Haven.

When these people, who had been captured in West Africa disembarked in Havana, they found no friends rushing to their defense, but the case in New Haven was quite different. Within ten days of their arrest Congregationalists in Connecticut and New York, led by noted abolitionist Lewis Tappan, and two Congregational ministers, Joshua Leavitt and Simeon Jocelyn, formed the *Amistad* Committee to defend the captives, paying for their legal costs, housing them, and aiming toward their repatriation.

Roger Sherman Baldwin, a Congregational layperson and later governor of Connecticut was the primary defense attorney for the Mendi people. The problem of communication was solved by Josiah Gibbs, a noted linguist from Yale Divinity School, who went to the docks in New York, yelling “one, two, three” in the native Mendi language, and was eventually answered by James Covey, a native Mendi speaker (who was a seaman with the British Navy) who heard Gibbs speaking. (Spielberg ridicules Gibbs in the movie, making him look like a fool.) Gibbs brought Covey to act as translator with the captives. The case of the Mendi captives eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court, where former president John Quincy Adams represented the defendants. The court found that the captives were, indeed, free people because they had been captured and transported in contravention of international law.

So, the Mendi were free, but they were in a strange land. The people of the First Church of Christ (Congregational) in Farmington, Connecticut, built housing for the Mendi, started a school for their children, and gave them ten acres of land to farm. For two years, the Mendi worshipped at First Church in Farmington, while they together with members of the church raised the funds for their repatriation to Sierra Leone.

Black and white worked together to end the scourge of the international slave trade and domestic slavery in the United States, and Congregationalists were at the forefront. One of the aspects of the *Amistad* Incident that makes it a watershed event in our tradition is that it binds social action and theology, which is a commitment that still helps define us as a denomination.

But, the work of the *Amistad* Committee didn't stop with the return of the Mendi. They merged with several other groups to form the American Missionary Association, the first antislavery home mission society in the United States. The AMA, following the Civil War, built more than 500 schools and colleges for recently emancipated African-Americans. Some of those colleges, like Talladega, Tougaloo, Fisk, and Dillard, among others, are still around today. The American Missionary Association continued to be a voice for justice and civil rights in this country until four years ago, when it was absorbed into the UCC's Justice and Witness Ministries.

While I was serving in Connecticut, the UCC and the Connecticut Conference helped fund the reconstruction of a replica of the *Amistad* at Mystic Seaport. I was privileged to see the new freedom schooner rise from the keel, made of purple heart wood from Sierra Leone, to the masts and sails. Today, the new *Amistad* is a floating

laboratory for multicultural education, and is traveling from the Florida keys to the Great Lakes.<sup>2</sup>

What does the Amistad Incident tell us about ourselves as a denomination? One thing is that ours is an engaged faith. We don't draw rigid lines between being "in the world" and doing God's work. We see the kingdom of God not as an afterlife reward, but as a vision for the world here and now; *that's one of our commitments.*

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While most denominations shy away from the kind of engagement ours was showing 160 years ago, we continue to grapple with the great issues of the day, and we attempt to address them in terms of our faith.

When I address matters of political and spiritual concern from the pulpit, I usually do not tell you what you ought to believe. Rather, I try to invite you to engage your political life in terms of your faith. I will also tell you how I think and feel about issues, but that doesn't mean that you have to agree with me. One of the reasons I have a sermon talk-back time on Monday mornings is so that you can come and share *your* ideas.

That said, I feel moved to ask for you to pray for the peace of the world this morning.

When God said to Noah "never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth," God was making a commitment to refrain from mass killing and destruction.

Only in the last 50 years have we humans had the ability to devastate the planet. We're doing it slowly by our injudicious stewardship of resources and pollution, but we also have the capacity to do it quickly with nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. I, for one, do not trust Saddam Hussein with such weapons, nor do I trust Kim Jung Il. That's the reason we have a system of international cooperation through the United Nations, namely to avoid the catastrophe of war. The prospect of a U.S. war on two fronts, which could easily escalate into a nuclear exchange, is enough reason to give peace a chance. And if that's not an adequate argument, then we ought to listen to the voice of God that we hear resonating in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament: Are we doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God?<sup>3</sup> Are we beating our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks?<sup>4</sup> Are we blessing the peacemakers?<sup>5</sup>

These are *our commitments* as Christians, people who claim to be disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

We, in this country, are in a unique position of power in the history of humankind. It is up to us to decide h

ow we ought to proceed, and as you do so, I would ask that you ask how your decision fits into the framework of your faith. I would ask that you remember who Jesus was and what he did. I would ask that you bend your ear to the Hebrew social prophets.

And as we move forward as a congregation, acting for justice and peace, I would ask you to remember the Amistad.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> for more information, go to [www.amistadamerica.org](http://www.amistadamerica.org)

<sup>3</sup> Micah 6.8

<sup>4</sup> Micah 4.3 and Isaiah 2.4

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5.9