

# “Covenant God/Covenant People”

a sermon by

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**Text: Hebrews 8:1-13**

One time as they were getting ready for bedtime prayers a little girl asked her mommy, “Why did God make persons?” As her mommy in her head sifted through the possible brilliant responses to this four-year-old questioner, her seven-year-old brother simply replied, “So God wouldn’t be alone.” The mommy looked at her son with wide eyes and said, “I think you are right, son. How did you know that?” He just shrugged his shoulder and replied, “I just don’t think God wants to be alone.”

How awesome that God created us and desires to be in relationship with us. God wants us. Despite all our shortfalls, all our mistakes, despite the many times we turn our backs on God, God wants us. This truth is at the heart of God’s covenantal relationship with us. This truth is what undergirds Christian community and enables us to be in relationship with one another.

Study after study in psychology has shown that while a therapist or counselor must have good knowledge and skills, the most important ingredient in helping a client is the ability of the counselor to develop a relationship of empathy and trust. Different mental illnesses need different types of treatment, and a good counselor needs to know what is appropriate and what will work. But they must develop a relationship—a covenant with each other. This is part of the problem with our current mental health system, which is driven by insurance companies. Insurance companies are interested in what is measurable and concrete in order to find the most efficient effective treatment for an individual. Now granted this is an important variable—we need to evaluate what works and what doesn't work and make sure we are not wasteful of resources. But the healing many people need comes not only from learning the best cognitive-behavioral technique to master their fears and anxieties, but from learning this technique in the context of a relationship with someone who cares and who knows how to understand and interpret their deeper fears and anxieties. This is the kind of relationship that is hard to measure concretely and that out of its very nature takes time to build.

Perhaps it is, as it should be, that more and more faith communities must take back the responsibility of developing these relationships with people in an intentional and thoughtful manner. Relationships are dangerous, risky business and can be quite messy at times. And yet relationships are God-given. If anything the Bible is a story about God's relationship with God's people and the danger, risk, and messiness of that relationship. The passage that we just read from Hebrews is part of the larger context of a sermon in which the preacher is trying to help a struggling, weary congregation understand who Jesus is in the whole of salvation history, and how he is a mediator of a new and better covenant than the old. Thomas Long, in his commentary on Hebrews, writes:

The bad news about the old covenant was that the people broke faith and violated their promises. The first covenant was not an equal affair—God was God, and the people were people—but it was, nonetheless, a two-way arrangement. If the people would hold on firmly to their end of the rope, then God promised to hold on to the other and pull them to a place of safety and rest. The people vowed that they would, indeed, hold on, but they quickly grew weary and let go. They swore obedience, but, like all human beings, they wavered, buckled, and finally fell. No law could make them obey... The good news, however, is that God did not let go of the rope. The people could not keep faith, but God does. The preacher [of Hebrews'] message is that, since the first covenant was not effective, God mercifully makes a better covenant. Because human sin is chronic and tenacious, the old covenant led to a cycle of defeat and despair... So God established a new covenant, this time one based on mercy and forgiveness.

The preacher of the book of Hebrews quotes a very familiar passage from Jeremiah—one that as a matter of fact we read as our Old Testament lesson last week. In the passage from Jeremiah, the prophet is confronting Israel with how they have broken time and time again the covenant they made with God, and yet how God has remained faithful to them. But the time has come to redefine this covenant, so that they no longer see it as an external document written on stone, but come to understand it as a deep intimate relationship written on their hearts. It is a very simple covenant—so simple: “I will be their God and they will be my people.”

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Marriage vows are simple. Marriage vows are simply a covenant where two people pledge their love and faithfulness to one another. And yet all of us in here, even if we are not married, know how deceptive the simplicity can be. We are all so complicated and have our many moods. It’s hard enough sometimes putting up with ourselves—to have to stay steady in relationship with someone else seems well nigh impossible sometimes.

There are times because of our very brokenness and destructiveness that our *human made* covenants are broken. But in our covenant with God, we have a partner who time and time again, no matter how much we have turned away and denied God, calls us back and yearns for us to be related to God ... “... for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive them their iniquity and remember their sin no more.” This is grace that endows life, for if it were not for God’s willingness to renew the covenant, we would be a people without hope. It is out of this covenant that Jesus came to be in relationship with us. Out of God’s very yearning for us, God became incarnate in human form, because God knew that in order to reach us, in order to teach us that God was not as concerned with law as with love and relationship, God must come down to meet us where we are, as broken human beings.

When I think about Jesus, what first comes to mind are *his* relationships, with his disciples, with the women who surrounded him, with the broken, diseased and outcast, and with the self-righteous religious authorities whose sole concern was upholding the law. Jesus’ power was the power of healing that occurred in his relationships with others as he sensed their deeper fears, pain and needs, and as he accepted them and loved them.

To me the heart of ministry is relationship—caring, honest, authentic relationships—not cheap, sugarcoated, doormat type of relationships that only seek to please and build up our own self-importance. Sometimes a caring relationship means telling the truth as we see it, and the truth is painful many times. Relationship is not always about yes; sometimes it is about no. Jesus never took away a person’s responsibility for his or her own self. With sadness, he let the rich young ruler walk away after this man heard what he needed to do to inherit the kingdom. Jesus asked the lame man who was unable to get into the healing pool at Bethzatha, “Do you want to be healed?” because Jesus knows that while we all say we want to be healed, healing often involves change. Many of us fear change more than we want healing. God’s covenant with us does not take away our freedom, for as God freely chooses to love us, so we are invited, not forced, to freely love God in return. And yet God continually beckons.

Many of you know that autism is a developmental disorder in which due to neurological problems a child is unable to develop attachments and communicate with others in a “normal” way. Autistic children often appear withdrawn, in their own world, seemingly unable to reciprocate love. And yet research has found that if autism is diagnosed early and the child is placed in immediate and intensive specialized therapy, the child often is able to make tremendous progress in relationships and communication. One mother wrote about an experience with her autistic son that to me is a wonderful metaphor for God’s persistent covenantal love to us. She wrote:

Bedtime rituals inspire both reflection and closure as we gauge the day's successes while attempting to put failures to rest. On a cold night many years ago, I added a blanket to my son's bed and prepared to close the chapter on another day. Feeling only weariness and the dull ache of guilt, I scrolled back and took inventory. Was I doing enough? Had I made the right choices? In a life filled with schedules and symbols, therapists and interventions, I was a novice sailor with no compass to direct me. Tucking the blanket under his chin, I stared into his eyes. A mixture of deep love and stabbing fear rushed over me. I placed my lips against his forehead and lingered there, a sigh intermingling with the kiss. As I walked away, the silence was broken by my son's voice calling after me. So often, I felt like Annie Sullivan pumping water over Helen Keller's hands while signing the word water. Desperate to pair meaning with language, I repeatedly poured the words of my heart over him, only to have them echoed back without apparent comprehension. Yet on this night, the burdens of struggle and self-doubt fell away as I turned back to see a radiant smile lighting up my son's face. And there I received my guiding star: the words "I love you so much, Mrs. Mom," for the first time.

God's covenantal love is like that. Like this mother, God calls to us, and reaches out to us again and again with love, but we don't hear, we don't understand, we are unable to comprehend the signs of this love surrounding us and we do not respond to it. Or we echo back the words without conviction and care. And yet, just like the mother above, God does not quit kissing our forehead and calling to us in the hope that someday a radiant smile will break across our faces and we will pour our love out in return: "I love you so much, my Lord and my God."

The messages of our society fool and deceive us. Our culture teaches plenty about happiness and little about joy. As some of the children learned in Vacation Bible School this week, joy is different from happiness. Happiness is a fleeting feeling, usually brought on by something fun or new or by a situation in which we find enjoyment. Now I like to be happy – there is nothing wrong about being happy, and we are all entitled to pursue happiness as is written in our very own Declaration of Independence. But joy is different. It is more deeply rooted. One can be joyful and suffering at the same time, for joy comes from a deeper place of peace. Love and faith produce joy.

This may be a broad statement but I tend to believe if we pursue only happiness, we may never find joy. When we pursue happiness that seems to be more about pursuing our own individual needs and preferences, whereas we discover joy often in the midst of great struggle. It is often in our relationships with God and or others that this joy is found.

As God calls us to be in faithful relationship with God's self, we are called to be in faithful relationship with each other. Note that a covenantal relationship will not always produce happiness, but a relationship maintained in faith and love has tremendous potential to produce a more deeply abiding joy. We are called to be a covenantal community, which means we are called to faithfulness to one another as a congregation, the body of Christ. We are the vehicles for God's grace. Our hands, our eyes, our mouths communicate God's love. As we live as a covenant community, what does this look like? It is really very simple:

When we lived in Winston-Salem, my husband did some supply preaching for the small rural churches of Salem Presbytery. One church he visited was a wonderful example of covenant. There were only about 25 members of the church, the youngest being in her late 50s. This small town had two other churches of different denominations—they were larger and had strong youth programs and other activities that had drawn away the younger families. But a couple of years before my husband visited there, a ten-year-old boy had begun to attend the church. He had no connection there, no family that attended there—his parents did not come with him—there were no other children to invite him there. But he was drawn to that small Presbyterian church. For the mostly elderly members of this church, this was a challenge—they could have encouraged him to go to one of the other churches with the thriving youth programs and art supplies and family life centers, and children’s curriculum and especially a permanent pastor. And maybe they did. But this little boy wanted to be at **that** particular church. And they had embraced him. By the time my husband went there to fill in one Sunday, they had a regular rotation of Sunday school teachers and a solid curriculum and they were teaching him about God’s covenant with God’s people. Each visiting pastor was instructed to have a children’s sermon for this one child. They were even trying to set aside a little bit of money to help with his college education someday. They had made a commitment to this child, just as God had made a commitment to them.

God’s covenantal love is based on what the theologian Paul Tillich calls *agape* love. A.J. McKelway, who was a member of this Presbytery and a professor at Davidson College, writes: “This is love that desires not one’s own, but the other’s fulfillment. It is independent of any contingent reactions of the loved one; it is unconditional. This characterizes God’s love for humans.”

What joy there was for the mother who in love kept reaching out to her son time and time again, when she finally saw his radiant smile and heard for the first time, “I love you so much, Mrs. Mom.” Her joy is a glimpse of God’s joy, when we finally comprehend the depth of God’s covenantal love for us and we respond, “I love you so much, my Lord and my God.” What joy there was for the members of the tiny church where Hunter preached, as out of love they prepared Sunday School lessons for this 10 year-old-boy, this child of the covenant. What joy is promised to us when we choose to be in covenantal relationship to God: “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” For this relationship is the foundation of all other relationships we have. When we commit to this relationship, we learn a faithfulness and love that translates into our everyday lives and the covenants we make with others. As we reach out in love and concern to others, concerned not just with our fulfillment but theirs also, we live out this covenantal type love—as we teach a child God’s grace, as we drive across town to help someone in need, as we stay steadfast in our family relationships through the tough as well as the happy times, as we support and care for someone going through a long illness. It is very simple and very hard to love in such a way. And yet when we allow this covenant to be written on our hearts, *we will know God, all of us, from the least of us to the greatest.*