

“The Meaning of Covenant”

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October 6, 2019 / World Communion Sunday

Jeremiah 31:31-34 NRSV and Matthew 26:26-30 NRSV

Will you please pray with me? Beloved God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

When I was a kid, we would often go visit my grandma and grandpa. Grandma had a menagerie of little glass and ceramic animals that she lined up along her windowsill. They were mainly forest animals—chipmunks, squirrels, bunnies, and skunks—basically all the animals you could see in the movie *Bambi*, which she just loved. I used to love to play with those animals, or to just sit and watch the way the sunlight glinted off them.

My grandma died about 23 years ago, but every time I see a little ceramic animal like the ones she had, I think of my grandma. It doesn't even have to be her animals. Just seeing ones like the animals, she had makes me think about her. And when I think about her, I don't just remember her face. I remember what it felt like to visit her. I remember her love, and quiet smile, and her sparkling, warm eyes. I remember playing games with her, singing, making crafts, sewing, and eating. It's amazing to me how such an ordinary thing like a little glass animal can bring back such powerful memories and emotions.

I wonder if you all have that experience? Is there someone special in your life who you remember every time you see, or maybe hear or smell something? Maybe a perfume or a pipe smell, or maybe a special picture or piece of jewelry?

Communion is meant to be an experience like this. Every time we take communion, we are meant to remember Jesus and the covenant he has made with us. We are meant to feel Jesus' profound love for us, and that amazed sense of wonder that God would love us so extravagantly, and so unequivocally that God would send God's son to us. We are also meant to remember that this meal binds us to a much larger community of people around the world, many of whom are taking communion on the same morning. So, we don't just feel Jesus' love, but we also feel the love of an entire world community that is bound together in this powerful covenant that reminds us that God is our God, and we are God's people.

Interestingly, though, if we look at the Gospel of Luke and at what Paul says about the Communion in 1 Corinthians, what Jesus asks of us is that we remember him every time we eat bread and drink wine (or grape juice). He says, “As often as you might eat [this bread] and drink [this cup], do it in remembrance of me.” This is really a remarkable request! Although Jesus made that request at Passover, which is an important religious ceremony for the Jewish people, he didn't say, “every time you celebrate Passover, think

of me.” Instead, he broke bread and poured wine and said, “as often as you eat and drink,” remember me. At that time and place, bread and wine were staples of the diet. And even now, many people eat some kind of bread pretty much every day. So if we remember Jesus every time we eat bread and drink wine or grape juice, we should be remembering him, fully remembering him, like I remember my grandma or you remember your special people--and we should be feeling that extravagant love from him, every day.

Remembering Jesus and re-experiencing his love for us are not all that we should be doing, though, when we eat and drink. Through communion, we renew our covenant with God. Covenant is a complicated concept and we’ll be talking more about it in the upcoming weeks. For now, I want to focus on how it is renewed through the celebration of Communion. A covenant is basically a promise. God has told us multiple times in scripture, but particularly through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, that God loves us. That love is eternal and graciously given, not earned. God promises to always love us and that we will always be God’s people.

In response, God’s people have certain responsibilities. Mainly, we are to walk in Jesus’ footsteps and follow his teachings. We are to love God with all our heart, strength and mind, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. So, when we say that we renew our covenant with God every time we take communion, we are telling God that we remember our part of the promise. Again, this isn’t supposed to be the kind of remembering that sort of flits into our minds and then goes away. It’s supposed to be a visceral, deep-down kind of remembering, the kind that pulls up images for our minds and powerful feelings in our hearts. And what I find remarkable is that Jesus seems to be asking us to do this every single time we eat bread or drink wine and grape juice. Every time.

This requirement makes sense, though it does seem like it might be asking a lot. The prophet Jeremiah tells us the same thing that we read about in the book of Deuteronomy a few weeks ago. God will write God’s law upon the hearts of the people. So, this means that God’s law will become internalized; we will come to know it intuitively AND we will choose to follow it because our hearts call us to follow it.

Getting people to feel that something is intuitive usually requires that we practice it... A LOT. People who play a musical instrument, who dance, who study foreign languages, or who are good at math know this to be true. My daughter plays the flute and she practices for at least an hour every day in order to really make all the music flow from her fingers. Making God’s law intuitive requires the same kind of constant practice. We can’t just think about it on Sunday or at bedtime prayers, or once a month at communion. A couple of weeks ago we sang and danced God’s law in church. That’s one way to practice. But another way to practice is by following what Jesus tells us in today’s scripture. We are to re-make our covenant every time we do the most ordinary of things—every time we eat and drink, we are to remember Jesus: his love, his sacrifice, his teachings. And every time

we think of these things, we are to think about our responsibility as disciples of Christ to follow God's law and to always act with love.

So, do this this week. Go out and *every time* you eat or drink, take a moment to really think about what it means to be a Christian. What does it mean to love others as completely and extravagantly as Jesus has loved us? What does it mean to love God with our entire heart, mind, and strength? What do these kinds of love look like when we practice them and how can we change our lives so that we practice them even more? Do those things, in remembrance of Jesus. Amen.