

“The Responsibility of Covenant”

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Romans 14:1-9 and Matthew 18:21-35

Holy God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Some years ago, my daughter's youth group made a tee-shirt. On the back of it, it said: "Instructions: Love God, neighbor, self. Repeat." I loved this shirt because it breaks down Christianity to its most basic message. As you know, being a Christian isn't just about receiving love and grace from God. Although that grace does not *require* anything from us, the promises we make to God during our baptism and during the sacrament of Communion *do* oblige us to behave in certain ways. We are to follow the examples and teachings of Christ, living out an ethical life that puts love of God and neighbor at the center of everything we do.

One way to figure out what that kind of life looks like is to examine how God behaves in God's covenant with us. Last week, we remembered the story of God, Noah and the ark. We learned that God had made a remarkable decision after the flood subsided. Despite God's awareness that people will sometimes hurt one another and, thus, hurt God, God chose to make a covenant with us that limited God's power to righteously respond to that sin. God promised to all living creatures that God would never again destroy the world. At the same time, God affirmed that human beings are children of God, made in God's image. So even knowing that we will disappoint God and hurt one another, God decided to place trust and hope in us, risking the suffering that comes from seeing humans' sin.

This remarkable decision on God's part should inform the way we read the scripture for this week. Last week's story was about God and the covenant God made with us. This week's scripture is about us and the part we're supposed to play in our covenants with God and one another.

In a lot of ways, this week's scripture readings are about power. In any relationship, we have a certain amount of power—often, a lot of power. In the parable from the book of Matthew, both the king and the servant have power. The king has the power of life and death, torture and freedom over his servant. He has financial power over him as well, since the servant owes him money. Likewise, the servant has financial power over one of his fellow servants.

The power we see in the Romans reading is maybe less obvious. The power discussed there is the power we have over our friends, colleagues, and fellow worshippers. It's the kind of power we have over anyone with whom we are in community. It's the power to criticize and judge versus the power to accept.

Paul mentions the potential criticism that can arise between vegetarian's vs omnivores, and people who worship on Sunday vs Saturday. He is worried that these groups will not only mock one another, but that they will try to claim that their way is more holy and right than the other. I know we can think of examples of this kind of thing in our world. We might think that churches that use traditional hymns instead of praise music are less worshipful—or vice versa. We might look down upon faiths where they have an altar call where people can make a profession of faith and then be baptized on the spot during the service. And those faiths that practice altar calls might say that our

congregation isn't moved by the Holy Spirit and not concerned enough with individual salvation because we *don't* have an altar call during the service.

These kinds of criticisms can be worse and more painful when they happen in our own church or in our own community. Churches have been divided entirely based on arguments about what time to worship, whether people should come forward for communion or the communion plates should be passed through the aisles, or what clothes people should wear to worship. We see this kind of thing a lot in our political debates—for example, different sides of the political isle often have different opinions about what our tax rate should be and what taxes should be spent on. And while it's certainly okay to have disagreements about these sorts of thing, what sometimes happens is that these disagreements about *things* turn into judgments about the people who hold the differing opinions. We start to think that the people themselves are less faithful, less holy, less moral than we are. And it's this negative judgment of people and our treatment of them that Paul is warning us against. This kind of power to judge and criticize almost has more impact on most people than the king's and servant's financial and political power because this is the kind of power that affects our sense of self, our self-worth, and our ability to have a loving relationship with others. This power of word and judgment is so powerful precisely because it is wielded by people in our community—people we know and trust—so people whose opinions matter to us. And because they are in our community, we see them all the time, sometimes daily, so the repetition of their words can really wriggle down into our souls.

The result is that people get hurt by their country, their communities, and even their church. They become disinterested in politics and stop paying attention or stop participating in the political process. When this sort of thing happens in the church, people sometimes leave their faith community, they lose their faith in God, or they form a very negative self-image. None of these things are good and none are the results that our covenants with each other are supposed to produce.

So how are we supposed to behave towards people with whom we have a relationship or covenant? We are supposed to model our relationships and covenants on the one made by God with us. So that means that we need to self-limit our power. Paul's discussion is about people whose actions don't really affect our own. If you're a vegetarian, and I'm an omnivore, your choices don't affect me at all. If I wear shorts to church, and you wear a suit, this doesn't affect me. So, in these cases, we can self-limit our power to judge and criticize. As Paul explains, their choices and my choices are between each individual and God. Moreover, I will add that our relationship with one another has to matter more than these minor differences of opinion. So, although we have the power to judge, to criticize, to offer suggestions to others about their behaviors, we should withhold that power.

Now, Jesus' parable in Matthew helps us understand what to do in matters where someone else's actions do affect us or other people. The point of this parable is clearly that we are to act with mercy, perhaps even accepting a certain amount of suffering in order to grant that mercy. I need to add some addendums here before I talk more about this. It is possible to accept too much suffering, and scripture clearly indicates that accepting too much suffering is NOT what God wants of us. If the relationship we're in becomes abusive, for example, that's a time to stop that relationship. We can see this in the parable from today's scripture. When the servant becomes violent towards his friend who owes him money, the king steps in and stops him. That second servant clearly isn't supposed to just sit there and accept suffering.

So when I say that God's covenant with us teaches us that we should be willing to accept a certain amount of suffering, I'm talking about the kind of internal suffering we might feel when a friend or community member disappoints us, when a parent doesn't live up to our expectations, when a politician votes differently than we wanted her to vote, or when a fellow church-member tries their hardest to change something that we really love and value. A marriage therapist once said that it's not a matter of *if* our partner will betray us, it's a matter of *when*. The therapist didn't mean that every partner will cheat on the other. What he meant is that we have certain expectations for people, and, at some point, our beloved will fail to live up to those expectations. This is true of all relationships, including the relationship between the self and the church or the self and the community. At some point, your church, your community, or your country will disappoint or hurt you. It will happen because people make mistakes, or they because get busy and miss something important, or because people have differences of opinion. So, what are we supposed to do when that happens?

If we take God's behavior at the end of the Noah story or the king's behavior in today's parable as examples, we are to act gently and kindly, working to maintain the relationship, despite our disappointment, anger or irritation. Sometimes this will require outright forgiveness, just as the king forgave the servant's debt. Other times, it will require lengthy conversations, searching for key similarities in belief that can be built upon in order to repair the relationship. It likely will require us to self-limit our power to criticize, to ignore, and to walk away. Again, our relationship with each other needs to matter more than our opinions.

So, does our covenantal relationship require that we just let people walk all over us? Does it mean that our own opinions never matter? Again, no. That's not what God demonstrates in God's relationship with us, nor is it what is taught in this parable. In the Noah's ark story, God sets up limits on human behavior and consequences for breaking those limits. As you will recall, God tells Noah that anyone who takes a human life will lose their own life. In short, murder is not tolerated by God and there will be consequences for that kind of sin. Likewise, the king in the parable provides consequences to his servant when the servant hurts and dominates his fellow.

What this means is that our mercy and forgiveness do not need to be boundless, nor do they need to exist without limits. In our covenants with one another, we must remember that we, too, are beloved children of God. So, we have to walk that tight-rope line, sometimes being willing to accept a certain amount of suffering in order to maintain and improve our relationship, while also providing limits and consequences for behavior that harms ourselves and others. But at the core of that tight-rope walk should be the goal to strengthen and support our relationships with the people in our communities and with God. And many times, those relationships require that we put the kind of trust and hope in our siblings in Christ, as God has placed in us. Remember: Love God, neighbors, self. Repeat. Amen.