THE NEW COVENANT

A Communion Sermon

Pilgrim Church, Duluth April 4, 1976 Royal F. Shepard, Jr.

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." Jeremiah 31:31-34

These words were spoken at a time of crushing disillusionment,
of pervasive distrust of people in authority,
of bewilderment over the ways of God,
a time of hopelessness.

For the kindgom of Judah had fallen,
the mountain of the Lord was occupied by foreign troops,
the covenant,
the bond of faithfulness between Yahweh and his people,
was shattered
perhaps forever.

Jeremiah, the angry prophet, said that it would happen,
and it did happen.

Now
The prophet speaks again to us.
He speaks his word of a new covenant written not in the law books, but on the heart.

And we
who have seen so much more history, hear these words
and we wonder:
Is this not what always comes out of collapse,
this sort of fantastic idealism?
When people feel that all practical possibilities are lost
they speak of the impossible dream.

Have we ever known a time
when we could get along with covenants
written only on the heart?
Heaven knows
we have broken both the letter
and the spirit
of the United States constitution every day
of our existence since 1787.
But do we really believe
that our national covenant could have survived
this long
without such a document?
Do we think if the founding fathers had simply said,
"Let us all promise in our hearts
to respect each other's rights and liberties,"
we could have avoided anarchy for half an hour?

The county clerks of this state
pursue a policy that seems a form of legalized
cynicism.
After the marriage covenant is sealed
and two people are declared one before
God
and humanity
and even in some respects before
the law,
after that the person performing the ceremony
gives out
not one piece of paper,
but two,
one piece marked, "for the bride,"
another piece marked,
"for the groom."
One wonders what is done with them.
Does each party take his or her
piece of paper to their love nest, and
does each one place his or her paper
in his or her own
strong box

to which he or she holds
in secret his or her
key?
and
on some day of reckoning when he or she
feels that the covenant has been violated,
does he or she
produce his or her little key
and open his or her little box,
and waving his or her copy in the air,
declare:
"ah ha!
you see I have my own piece of paper!"
Is that the vision
the county clerk holds in mind
when he prints up these documents?
He will say to us, perhaps,
"But they come in handy. For every
two marriages
I enter on the books these days, I write down
one divorce.
Now if we allowed people just to write
these things on their hearts
we would have a huge mess
in the courthouse."

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"A new covenant on people's hearts,"
says Jeremiah.
Clearly this is not
a purely human possibility.
It is God who will put his law
within them.
This is a divine possibility whose day
has not yet arrived.
In Jeremiah's day it did not seem realistic
to speak of covenants not on paper, but only
on the heart.
Nor in our day either.

But how realistic then are the paper covenants?
The covenant between Yahweh and Israel,
the covenant of Mt. Sinai, the covenant chiseled
on tablets of stone.
That covenant was broken.
That was a fact.
It is doubtful whether anyone could have found
the stones anymore.
This was a practical truth:
In a covenant based purely on the law
there was no salvation.
And perhaps we see that too
about our secular covenants?
What good is a written constitution unless
there is a covenant of faithfulness
written on the hearts of the people.
Unless there is genuine commitment
to justice and honesty
and respect for the rights of others,
what do these documents avail?
Many nations have written constitutions,
some of them as noble sounding as our own,
yet
oppression and corruption are the rule
of their national life.
and
perhaps we have learned
even in this country
in recent years, how helpless
a written constitution becomes
when there is no covenant of mutual faithfulness
written on the hearts
of the people and their leaders.

On the other hand, sometimes a true covenant arises without planning between two people or
within a group of people.
It is a bond of friendship
that emerges naturally.

Nothing is written down;
there is no formal structure,
no exchange of vows,
no established social institution to which the
covenant conforms.
The relationship may be brief.
Yet while it lasts
one knows that it is strong and genuine
as anything in human life can be.

So then, the day has not yet come when we live
either with God or humanity by covenants written only on the heart.
Yet we do see that unless they are undergirded
by covenants of the heart
the covenants on stone or paper do not work.

And we may see as well,
situations where people pass beyond
law and commandment
and yet are profoundly true to one another,
and in this way we perceive a sign
of that higher covenant yet to be.

Jeremiah was a visionary
but his vision holds our hope.

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Now then his final thought:
"For I will forgive their iniquity
and I will remember their sin no more."
The possibility of a new covenant depends on forgiveness,
forgiveness for both the oppression and
the brokenness of human law,
forgiveness for the inconsistency of the human
heart.

Jesus was thinking of Jeremiah's saying that night
in the upper room
He was thinking of a new covenant between God and his people
founded on grace that was freely given.

Forgiveness would make that possible,
forgiveness offered
and forgiveness received.
"This cup is the new covenant in my blood,"
Jesus said,
"poured out for the forgiveness of sins."