

The Church's Glue  
Jeremiah 31: 31-34, Matthew 26: 26-29  
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What holds the church together? As we learned in our time with children, there are many different ways you can stick things together: tape, double sided tape, duct tape, clear tape, glue, a hot glue gun, staples, tooth picks, pins, push pins, paper clips, bailing wire, and bubble gum, to name a few. Good answers, but none seemed just right for the tie that binds church members. Could it be that we are bound together because we all think alike? It didn't take me long on my first Sunday back at this church to realize that, whatever holds us together, it's not that we think in lock step.

No surprise that I have an answer to my own question. As a church we are held together by covenant, which can be defined as a sacred promise or a commitment in faith. Covenant is best understood through examples. We are fortunate in this, because the Bible is full of examples of covenants, both in the Old and the New Testaments. In fact the word 'testament' itself is another term for the word 'covenant'.

Covenant is a theme that runs through the Bible, beginning with God's covenant with Noah and his family, a covenant that God will never again destroy the world by flood. Later God makes a covenant with Abraham and Sarah promising them a home and numberless descendants if they follow where God leads. The most extraordinary of the early covenants is the one that God makes with the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

The story of this covenant is in the Book of Exodus where we read, "Then Moses went up to God; the Lord called him from the mountain, saying. "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." Moses soon learns that the heart of this covenant - what Israel must do to keep it - is the Ten Commandments.

This covenant offered by God is the climax of an incredible series of events for Moses and Israel. Shortly before they had been slaves in Egypt, oppressed so hard they could not stand, as the old hymn puts it. In their suffering they cried out to God. God heard their voice and acted to deliver them from slavery. Forever after they could answer the question - Who is God? - by proclaiming that God is the one who freed their oppressed ancestors. This event is critical in the biblical story. It is also an essential event for churches like our United Church of Christ, who see in the act of liberation a revelation of the nature of God. As God acts to free and care for the oppressed and the outcast, so we are called to do the same.

God delivers the Israelites from slavery and then offers to be in continuing relationship with them through covenant. In this way God honors them, showing

them that they are indeed a treasure in God's sight. What they must do in return is to keep covenant with God by obeying God's commandments.

It didn't happen: they repeatedly broke covenant, defying God and God's commandments. God had liberated them from slavery, and they turned their backs on God. You would think that God would be quit of such an ungrateful people. Not so, as Jeremiah tells us, God offers them a new covenant, a covenant not written on stone like the Ten Commandments, but one written on their hearts. For Christians this leads directly to the New Testament, or new covenant, and the words that Jesus shared with the disciples on the night of Holy Communion, "This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

In spite of our turning away, God seeks to be in covenant with us. Though we are free to break covenant, God continues to seek us, continues to seek a relationship with us. Covenant is the will of God.

We have seen that covenant is one of the great themes of the Bible. It is also a great theme of the church. In 16<sup>th</sup> century England, a group of Protestants sought to found a new church based on the example of the early church in the Bible. The churches of their day, Catholic and then Anglican, were geographical parishes, who that what church you attended depended upon where you lived.

But this is not what they found in the Bible. There they found a church based on covenant and a people's willingness to covenant together. These 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestants would become the Congregationalists who settled in New England and then spread westward founding covenant based churches, including this one First Congregational United Church of Christ in Northfield.

We can see their influence in Article 3, Section 1, of the constitution of our church, "The church will welcome into membership as full or associate members all who desire to be disciples of Jesus Christ and who covenant with the congregation to share in the ministry of the church . . ."

We are heirs to the early Congregationalists, and in faith we are heirs to a covenant making tradition which spans the Bible, culminating in the bread and the cup of the new covenant at Holy Communion, the sacrament concluding our service today. When we read the stories of covenants in the Bible, we are reading our own story.

That we can make covenant is an expression our value, dignity, and freedom. Covenant is also an expression of our commitment to stay tougher in the church. We can disagree, we can understand what our faith is calling us to do differently, and yet we can yet stay together because we are bound together in holy covenant.

In our covenant based community, church members are in a relationship of love and care for one another. They support one another through physical and emotional hardships. In this way covenant can be life giving and life saving. In covenant, when our own faith is shaken, and we see little to give us hope, the faith and hope of other members raises us up and carries us through. In covenant we are never alone. It is our glue.