

A Covenanted Community

Exodus 19:1-6

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On this Sunday before Cindy Maddox begins her ministry among us as our senior pastor, I invite us to reflect on the covenant that unites us together as a church and soon will unite us with Pastor Cindy.

In the book of Genesis, we are told that human beings are created in the “image and likeness of God”. Theologians have understood this in different ways. Our ability to tell right from wrong, our capacity to create, and our ability to love have all been suggested as answers to the question of how we are created in the image and likeness of God. Another answer to this question, the one I’ll focus on today, is our ability to make and keep promises. In the Bible such promises are called covenants. Think of them as sacred promises, holy vows, deep commitments, the tie that binds. We wouldn’t be here without them.

Biblical covenants include God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah to give them descendants as numberless as the stars of the sky, God’s covenant with Noah, a covenant that bears the rainbow sign, God’s covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, which is witnessed by the 10 commandments, God’s covenant with king David, the anointed one or messiah, and the new covenant or testament which Jesus makes at the last supper when he said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood which is shed for many. Do this in remembrance of me.” You can see from this list that covenants structure the biblical narrative.

Today I want to celebrate covenants, old, new, and, yet to come. In the heritage of our own denomination, covenant is a major player. The proto- Congregationalists in late 16th century England came together as a gathered or covenanted community as opposed to a geographical church. Like us, they chose to join a particular church, rather than being assigned to it because of where they lived. Like us they became part of a church bound together by sacred covenant.

How do you hear the word covenant? Today it has legal uses, especially in contracts and deeds, which take it far from its biblical meaning. Yet even in the Bible there is a kind of legal aspect to covenants as they often impose duties and obligations. For example, the biblical covenant at Mt. Sinai includes the words “obey my voice and keep my covenant.” Exactly what this meant is spelled out in the following verses, the 10 commandments.

Many biblical covenants are like this entailing that you do some things, and don’t do others – thou shalt, thou shalt not. But in the Bible, covenants are a lot more about joy than obligation. They assert that we have the ability to enter into enduring relationships, both with other people and with God. Our capacity to make covenants raises us up and proclaims that we are indeed formed in God’s image and likeness.

A sense of personal dignity, of having value and self-worth, is essential to a person’s well-being. Who are we? We are creatures who are invited through covenant into a sacred relationship with our Creator and with one another. It’s a main reason the author of the 8th Psalm can say that we humans are “crowned with glory and honor.”

Another thing about biblical covenants, they’re not static. We don’t make a covenant, like we buy a loaf of bread, one off and we’re done. No, a covenant is a living thing, a promise to walk together into the future. In the new covenant Jesus offers us, we are invited into a relationship of love. What this means in our day to day lives is something we’ll learn as we live it out. Our United Church of Christ mantra “God is still

speaking.” captures this same reality. Listening to the word of God in Christ, our understanding of our covenant never stops growing.

We here at First United Church of Christ in Northfield MN are people bound together in a holy covenant made when we joined this congregation. Our covenant commitments include claiming this church as our own, caring for one another, supporting our church with our time, talent, and treasure - witness the stewardship letter we received in the mail last week.

Also like biblical covenants, our covenanting together as church members is a lot more about joy than obligation. It hearkens back to those ancient words of Genesis of being created in the image and likeness of God. It’s an exercise of our freedom to choose and of our dignity as human beings. In the joy of our covenantal life together, we are bound together with ties of love and care for one another. Keeping covenant can be hard, sometimes we fail, but it remains an expression of the best that we are.

The last couple of years have tested our church covenant in multiple ways. Beloved pastors have moved on to other callings, and we miss them. The world around us has been shaken by political and racial turmoil. Climate change is no longer a future threat, but a present reality. And for more than a year and a half, we have been living through a pandemic. As a covenanted community, we draw our strength from being together. At times Covid has prevented this, forcing us to be physically apart even as we worship together.

Our covenant has been tested, but we are still together. Thank God and thank the people who have served us. We chose Pastor Wendy as our interim senior past and benefited mightily in our pastoral search process from her wisdom and experience as an associate conference minister. Through all our recent changes and challenges, Pastor Lauren has been there for us, graciously adapting her ministry to new leadership roles as the needs of our church have changed.

As good as our pastoral leadership has been during this time of testing, we would have long since closed up shop if it weren’t for the covenant commitment of so many members. Our church officers and council have continued First UCC’s long tradition of strong, dedicated lay leadership.

With the demands of the pandemic, new leaders have come forward to provide the technical support needed for on-line worship. In all the areas of our programming and life together, lay leaders have allowed us to continue while being as safe as possible. And following in the footsteps of so many brave women and men in our past, members have come forward to guide us in the critical justice work of our day.

Now we have come to the beginning of a new chapter in our history. Next Sunday, Pastor Cindy starts here, and in a couple of months she will be officially installed as our senior pastor. I read through the Installation service for a new pastor that’s in the United Church of Christ’s Book of Worship. The words “covenant” or “covenantal” are used six times in the course of it.

We have good reason to celebrate the covenant we will be making with Pastor Cindy. In her candidating weekend, she showed herself to be a warm person and a gifted preacher. She comes with experience and energy for the work. Moreover, and this is critical, she is the person who was recommended by our search committee. As a former pastor and now member of this church, I cannot overstate how much I respect the wisdom of this committee. If they recommended her, then she’s good to go

Covenanting with a new pastor is a holy act, echoing so much biblical and church history. It’s also the act of somebody starting a new job, who’s going to need some time to settle in. As a pastor, I know it’s challenging when you start in a new church. Yes, you’re excited and energized by a new call, but there are also so many people you need to get to know, and there’s a sermon to preach next Sunday.

I know there are members of this church who work harder than I ever did as pastor, and I wasn't a slug by any means. But in seminary I was taught that the pastoral ministry is one of the last bastions of the generalist, and I believe that this is true now more than ever. Besides the core responsibilities of peaching, teaching, and justice making - there are also responsibilities as an administrator, staff leader, counselor, worship planner, fund raiser, recruiter, and building manager.

And I know by experience, if you're going to hold your own with Chris, Theo, and Bob, you'd better know something about music, and it helps to have an appreciation of limericks. With Covid, there are multiple added responsibilities for knowledge of technology and social media. And none of us know what other skills the future will demand, except that they will.

That's a lot of stuff for one person to be good at, and nobody is going to be good at all of it. We have chosen extremely well for our new senior pastor, but I know that like all pastors, she's not going to have every gift to the degree it would be great to have. So on Pastor Cindy's behalf, indeed on behalf of all clergy, I ask for your patience and understanding.

I also ask for us all to remember our covenant as church members. We have entered into the joys of being members of this wonderful church, and we have accepted responsibilities to do what we can to strengthen it. As faithful members did for us in the past, so we want to leave a vital church for the next generation. Together in loving covenant we can do this. We have endured a time of testing, and now we are ready to embrace our new pastor. Thanks be to God!