

Covenant Making

A seminary professor named Robert Webber shared these words in a conversation with the editors of Christianity Today magazine:

Some time ago I was biking in Michigan and met another biker who, like myself, was a professor of theology. In the course of our conversation by the side of the road he said something I will never forget: “*Bob, all I really want in life is for the Word for God to take up residence inside of me and form me into Christ-likeness.*” I think this statement hit me hard because my seminary training in the Bible was never that personal. We were always asking, “What does it say?” and seldom if ever made the step into a deep personal application of “How can that truth take up residence in me?”¹

Well, friends for the past five weeks, we’ve been talking about some signs, or practices that tend to indicate that the truth *has* taken up residence in us; or, from another perspective, practices that allow soul access to that truth. We looked at five “Practices of Fruitful Congregations” and all along this journey, pointed out that these become practices of an entire *congregation* only when the individuals in that congregation make them part of their lives. Here’s what we talked about:

- **Radical Hospitality** – receiving God’s Invitation to come to his table, ‘as you are’, and then doing whatever we can to share that same invitation with our hurting world. This kind of hospitality is *radical*, in the basic meaning of the word, i.e., it goes to the *heart* of what hospitality is.
- **Intentional Faith Development** – the second week of this series we talked about how growing in our faith, in our walk with God rarely happens ‘by accident’. There are always surprises, of course, and God is ultimately in control, but the reality is that if we don’t have a plan on how we expect to make ourselves available to God, we are really likely planning to fail.
- **Passionate Worship** – we talked about how important it is to place ourselves among God’s people and seek his presence together with other believers in

¹ Robert Webber in *The Covenant Companion* (Jan. 1990). *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, no. 4.

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passionate worship. This is the place where I, and HY, and others have the only opportunity to teach you for the most part; but much more to the point, Jesus promised that “when two or three gather together in my name I will be there among them”. Now, since he is obviously with us when we are alone, by that statement he must mean that there is a certain depth of his self-revelation to us that only comes through corporate (i.e., group) worship.

- Week Four Pastor HeyYoung shared another vital practice with us: **Risk Taking Mission and Service**. Jesus said, “Freely you received, freely give”. He meant by that that our gifts are meant to be shared. If we are to grow in Christ, we need an outlet – a way, a place in which we can follow the example of Jesus, who washed the feet of his disciples and then said, “Now, follow my example.” Without service, our Christian life becomes like the Dead Sea, in Israel – with no outlet, it is toxic and lifeless. We each have been gifted to serve God *somewhere*. Risk Taking Mission stretches our faith, and our boundaries as we leave our comfort zones and lean on God.
- And finally, last week I spoke about our need to give. As we grow into the likeness of Jesus, we also will reflect this most basic characteristic of Jesus: he gave. To repeat a statement from last week’s message: “[I believe] that there simply *can’t* be a deep level of commitment to following Christ (i.e., any real discipleship) not only without some sort of planned *giving* in general, but specifically without practicing **Extravagant Generosity**.” Jesus talked more about money than any other subject, which should clue us in to the importance of this. We need to give to grow...

Ok, so we talked about these things, and I received good feedback, and there was a powerful sense of worship in all 20 of those services – 4 each week. I know when you are with me, and you are! (I think!)

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But still, that seminary professor's statement haunts me, because I know how easy it is to *hear* these things, and even *believe* them, and yet somehow, the message gets stuck, and never moves from our head to our hearts.

Remember what he said? "We were always asking, "What does [the Bible] say?" and seldom if ever made the step into a deep personal application of "How can that truth take up residence in me?" So, I'm wondering, "How can this truth take residence in us?"

Well, about 6 years ago, we started trying to answer that question in this church by means of what we are going to do in the rest of our time together here today. The making of a "personal covenant with God" is truly one of the most significant things that we will do this year, because, if you take this seriously, this document is going to set the basic course for your walk with God in the year 2011. So, I was very serious last week when I said this is a Holy Moment for us. Why? Your intentionality in doing this (and your willingness to fulfill your promises) will have a dramatic effect on your fruitfulness as a disciple of Christ in the coming year and by extension, the Fruitfulness of First UMC in the coming year.

Another preaching professor, Lewis Smedes wrote about the significance of promises:

Yes, somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God.

What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

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When a person makes a promise, she stakes a claim on her personal freedom and power. When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future.²

The word covenant basically means ‘a promise’. In these documents you are saying, God, I’m going to seek you in the coming year – and I’m not just making a statement with no substance to it. I have a plan... and here it is. Now look, I certainly recognize that God is greater than our plans... but I also know that this is something God will honor.

In Psalm 116 : 12 – 14 we read

¹² What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me? ¹³ I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD. ¹⁴ I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.

and then the Psalm ends:

¹⁶ Truly I am your servant, LORD; I am your servant, as was my mother before me; you have loosed my bonds of affliction. ¹⁷ I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD. ¹⁸ I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people, ¹⁹ in the courts of the house of the LORD— in your midst, Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.

(Will the ushers please pass out the covenants?)

Let me take a moment to explain how we do this – especially for those of you who are new. We call these “personal covenants with God” because that’s exactly what they are. They are not for anyone but you to read. We’re going to ask you to bring them to the chancel here when you’re finished as an act of consecration, put them in a self – addressed envelope. We will not read them, we will simply keep them, and return them to you in about 6 months to remind you of what you promised, and see how you’re doing.

² Lewis Smedes, “The Power of Promises,” *A Chorus of Witnesses*, edited by Long and Plantinga, (Eerdmans, 1994)

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So, be as specific as possible. If you're not sure about anything, write that, maybe your 'plan' will be to pray for direction but you are promising to be open. Some questions you might want to address in each of the five areas will be on the screen if you need some help.

Does everyone have a Covenant form? Pens/ pencils?

Let's pray and get to it....

Wesley's Covenant Prayer

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will.

Put me to doing, put me to suffering.

Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you,

Exalted for you or brought low by you.

Let me be full, let me be empty.

Let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and heartily yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, O glorious and blessed God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

You are mine, and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant which I have made on earth,

Let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.