

Covenant - From the Inside Out
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There is a certain category of humor that appeals to religious types, and floats around on the internet. One is the Facebook page called Unvirtuous Abbey. Many of their posts are framed as prayers, and they are somehow irreverent and socially progressive and devout at the same time. Then there are jokes and stories that pastors forward to each other. One came to me recently from one source, then showed up again, with slightly different wording. It seems I was meant to share it with you today. So here goes:

There were three churches in a small rural town: a Presbyterian church, a Quaker Meeting House, and a Congregational church. Each one had a terrible problem with squirrels invading the building and making a nuisance of themselves. The pastors of the churches got together to share their solutions to the problem. The Presbyterian church had decided to call a meeting of the elders. After much prayer and bible study they determined that the squirrels were *predestined* to be there and that they should not interfere with God's will. The Quakers met to silently consider their options and decided that they could not harm any of God's creatures. So they humanely trapped the squirrels and set them free a few miles from town. Three days later, the squirrels were back. But the Congregationalists came up with the best solution. They baptized the squirrels and made them members of the church. Now they only see them at Christmas and Easter.

Pastors and churches like to joke about the question of attendance at worship, and the fact that it is sometimes hard to get people involved in the work of the church. Maybe joking is better than the other alternative, which is to bemoan lack of people or lack of money, and get worried about the diminishing importance of the church in people's lives. But today I don't want to moan. I don't want to be cynical about baptism or church membership, I don't want to be negative about what the church needs and hasn't got. Today I celebrate each person's presence in this place. We have so much. We have been given so much.

We have a book, a Bible, that binds us to an incredible tradition. We can hear the voices of our ancestors as they wrestled with questions and doubts and pain and joy. Every week we return to this book. We read and ponder what it means to worship and follow the God we find there. It gives us a common story and a common language with other communities of faith over the whole world. When I turn the pages of this book, I can hear God calling. More than two thousand years ago, he called to the people of Judah through the prophet Jeremiah. God called, and they heard the word "covenant." And they did not just hear it once: this idea of God's persistent desire for relationship, unchanging in intensity, while flexible in expression, was heard over and over in many ways. Today we heard about a "new covenant." It was not new in the sense of a changed idea of what was right and wrong. What was new was the way it would be internalized, written on the heart. (And, by the way, it is implied that when this new covenant really comes to be, all we teachers will be out of business, and preachers will need to find new work!)

We have a book and the stories keep coming. When I turn the pages of the book, I can hear Jesus calling. Jesus liked to call through parables – some of them quirky and baffling. They are populated by shepherds and kings, by widows and unjust judges. In our reading today, Jesus seems

to be advocating persistence, about the “need to pray always and not to lose heart.” We are called to persistence in seeking justice like that widow, and in acts of mercy. We are called to be in this for the long haul, and we can be the community that takes the long view, recognizing that problems are not solved instantly, that justice is not enacted with a snap of the fingers, that mercy and forgiveness are a daily necessity.

We have a book, and we have relationships. I think that part of Jeremiah’s concept of a new, internalized covenant, written on the heart, is that it reaffirms the importance of emotional intelligence. We do not learn of covenant in isolation, with just a book in our hands. We look at each other and speak words of promise, then we spend time – years and years, a lifetime – learning what the words mean. We discover that the core of covenant is living out the extravagant welcome of God’s embrace. In the Christian tradition, the internalized new covenant was symbolized in the Last Supper, when Jesus gathered friends around a table and shared bread. The eating of the bread quite literally internalized the life of a man who was wholly dedicated to loving his neighbors. And so we were given the precious gift of relationship within the community.

We have a book, we have relationships, and we have a place to call home. In some ways, this is just a building, just wood and windows, just insulation and paint. (And a steeple and a bell.) But the fact that people have been gathering here for almost two hundred years – gathering, pausing, leaving, returning, staying on – imbues this space with a particular Spirit. The songs sung a century ago and a week ago linger in the air. The tears that flow at funerals and the smiles that bloom when a child is baptized bless this sanctuary. The yearnings for peace and the call to action still swirl around us. This space is the living, breathing center of a communion of saints, living and dead, far and near, and so it is precious to us.

We are in this for the long haul, and we can be the community that welcomes arrivers and returners and visitors and seekers. Thinking of that joke about the squirrels and Christmas and Easter: I am so happy to see the squirrels that turn up here at those times. I see the grown children of our community, back for vacation, looking one year older, but their faces glowing like little children when the candles are lit and we sing “Silent Night.” I am so happy that this place exists for them to return to. Sometimes I see the young people who have gone on our work trips come back from college, or after college to worship here on a Sunday. They won’t come every week. But the sight of them once a year is a beautiful thing to me. When we baptize children or confirm teenagers, we put them on a pretty long tether, because God puts them on a pretty long tether. God is working on their inner hearts, persistently writing a story of love and acceptance. We are the place where that first began, a place that represents their spiritual home.

Part of the reason I can speak of young people being on a long tether is that I have felt that way myself. I am not surprised when people turn away from the church or lose interest because that was my story. In my late teens and early twenties I never went to church. And after that, I might attend somewhere as a visitor, but I never really got involved. It was not until I moved to Norwich, and began to attend here, that I felt the tether really reeling me in. This was a place of return: a place where that persistent God was finally heard. The Norwich Congregational Church offered me a community that was active in mission (mostly cooking food), which was the first hook, and a group of people who were engaged in grappling with the Bible, with our responsibilities in the world, with nurturing our children, and with singing songs. This community had been cared for and supported for almost two hundred years before I got here. People had given of their time, talent, substance and

influence so that I could find a church home, and so that each of you could worship here this morning.

There is no way that Jeremiah or Jesus or the people who gathered this church in 1817 could have envisioned the life of faith we live today. But all through history, people have been guardians of that faith, interpreting and living out the always-new challenge of being the people of God and demonstrating God's love. Their stewardship and dedication have brought us to this place. We are now in the position of considering what we will pass on to our children and those who have not yet entered these doors. Belonging to this community of faith means engaging in the hard work of discernment and managing the tension between keeping the best of the past, responding to the needs of the present, and being open to the call of the future.

When my children and your children and children we have never heard of come to this place in coming years, when they feel that tug on the tether, I hope that they will find a warm welcome. I hope that they will find a beautiful sanctuary and beautiful music and wise words coming from the pulpit. I hope that they find that some things are the same and bring back fond memories. But most of all I hope that they will find a community of people who continue to listen for the call of God. What we devote to the church today will determine what they will find here when they return. We have so much. We have been given so much. Let us show our gratitude in song.