

“Promises, Promises: God’s Covenant through Christ”

Matthew 13:13-23

Acts 2, selected verses

The Annual Meeting of the Congregation

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Introduction

We’re getting close to the end of our sermon series, “Promises, Promises.” In contrast to many of our New Year’s resolutions – which we often break as soon as they’re made – God’s promises are sure. Throughout the Bible, God reaches out to people in covenantal relationship:

- based on a promise
- sealed by a visible sign
- resulting in a new identity and way of life.

We opened our series with a renewal of our baptismal covenant. In the covenant of baptism, God promises to make us God’s children through the power of the Holy Spirit. The water of baptism is the seal. The result is a new creation in us.

Next, we looked at covenants in the Old Testament. In the covenant with Abraham, God promised to make his offspring numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore. The sign of the covenant was circumcision. Abram’s new identity was Abraham, and his offspring would be God’s chosen people, blessed to be a blessing.

Last week, we heard a wonderful message from Rabbi Evan Moffic about the nature of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. As he reminded us:

“The Hebrew word for covenant is *brit*. It connotes a sacred relationship, a commitment between God and the Jewish people. It began with Abraham. It was affirmed by Moses in the Exodus from Egypt. And it was sealed with the entire people through the giving and acceptance of the Torah, the five books of Moses, at Mount Sinai. Yet, that is only the beginning. The rabbinic interpreters refer to this *brit*, this covenant, as a *brit olam*, an eternal covenant. It is dynamic. It is not frozen in one time and place. It is rooted in the past, yet evolves into the future.”ⁱ

And, Rabbi Moffic reminded us, the goal of this *brit*, this covenant, is not for the sake of the Jews alone, but for “the task of *tikkun olam*, repair of our world, with strength and support from the God of us all.” Today, on the occasion of the Annual Meeting of our congregation, it is appropriate that we turn to the new covenant God made with us through Jesus Christ.

Matthew 16:13-23

Now when Jesus came to the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give

you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Jesus’ prediction was, of course, fulfilled. He suffered at the hands of the elders, priests and scribes; he was killed on the cross; and on the third day he was raised. Then he ascended into heaven. In the book of Acts we learn what happened next: how the covenant that God had promised through Jesus was sealed, sealed by the Holy Spirit and baptism. The result, of course, was a new identity: the body of Christ for the world.

Acts 2, selected verses

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house.... Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and ... all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages. ...” [When they went into the streets, everyone wondered what had happened, and whether they were even drunk! But Peter addressed the crowds.]

“Listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power ... [was] crucified and killed. ... But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ... Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this [Spirit] that you both see and hear. ... Therefore ... know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah.”

Now when [the crowds] heard this, they were cut to the heart and [asked], “What should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” ... Awe came upon everyone ... [and] all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their ... goods and distribute the proceeds ..., as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread ... and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number.

Today as we gather for the Annual Meeting of the congregation, we take our place in a long line of people who have done so. For 152 years this congregation has gathered on this corner

for a shared and holy purpose: “for worship, fellowship, and the work of the kingdom,” to use my long ago predecessor’s words.ⁱⁱ

But, of course, our church stands in an even longer line of believers, as today’s Scripture reminds us. At the beginning of that line is the disciple Simon, whom Christ promised to give the “keys of heaven.” Simon’s new identity was Peter, literally, “the rock,” the foundation on which the church would be built. Soon after Jesus’ death and resurrection, God’s promise was fulfilled, and the church was born on Pentecost. The sign of the new covenant was baptism by the Holy Spirit; so that followers of Jesus received a new identity: the body of Christ in the world.

As we meet today as a congregation, then, we are meeting not just as a corporate entity, but as the body of Christ. We convene not just to review the year and receive a budget, but to take stock of our faithfulness: to measure how well we are living out our new identity in Christ.

So how are we doing? It depends a lot on what measure we choose to use. If we are measuring by budget, we are doing pretty well. We ended 2011 with a marginal deficit on a \$2.7 million budget; next year we’re projecting a healthy increase to nearly \$2.9 million. If we are measuring by membership, we are holding our own at 1878; in 2010 we recorded 1829 members. This is a healthy increase, especially at a time when sociologists are reporting membership flattening at even the healthiest evangelical churches.

But are any of those the measure by which we should judge our success? I’ll never forget what Dave Tolmie said a few months ago at a focus group meeting as we explored a new ministry. We were discussing how best to equip corporate and civic leaders to live out their faith. In the middle of brainstorming, Dave said: “What I think we need most is this: I think we need a different measure of success.” I think Dave is spot-on. Being faithful to Jesus Christ commands a different gauge for leaders to measure whether or not they are doing well ... a different gauge to measure whether or not they are triumphing over the challenges that matter most ... a different gauge to discern whether or not they are adding value to the things that make a difference. People who are striving to be successful Christians don’t measure themselves against the norm of the culture! They measure themselves against the norm of Jesus Christ. If that’s true for individual believers, how much more should the church – the body of Christ – measure itself not by cultural norms but by the measure of success set forth in Scripture.

Let’s look at some of those norms, and how we’re doing against those measures. In Acts 2 we read:

“Awe came upon everyone ... [and] all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their ... goods and distribute the proceeds ..., as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number.”

- First, are we “*holding all things in common*” and sharing in proportion to our gifts? Stewardship last year was solid. Last year we received over \$2.2 million in pledges and other gifts; Rummage, the Auction, and special appeals raised over \$200,000 more. In the year ahead, we anticipate that this combined number will reach close to \$2.8 million. This is a tremendously generous congregation. Moreover, in most households the church is one of the mission agencies you support. While you don’t flaunt your largesse, I’m keenly aware that many of you are digging deep to do what you can. Whether you’re unemployed and giving \$20 to those who need it even more than you do, or you’re flush with money and giving \$20,000,000 to charitable causes, many of you are sharing what you can out of commitment to God’s work in the world.
- Next, are we “*distributing the proceeds to [those who have] need*”? Mission spending last year totaled \$575,000; in the year ahead, thanks in part to a large one-time gift to Faraja School, mission giving will top \$700,000. In addition to dollars spent, we devoted our time to a number of missions: in North Chicago and Waukegan, we volunteered at PADS, Soup Kitchen, Boys & Girls Club and the Neal School. Internationally, we sent for the first time a mission delegation overseas: to Tanzania to witness the work of the Faraja School. And we supported our first Young Adult Volunteer to spend a year in mission in South Korea: our daughter Anna has been teaching there since August.
- Next, are we “*spending much time together in the temple*”? How is attendance at worship ... not to compare ourselves with other congregations, but to measure our own faithfulness? I hate, by the way, a question common in evangelical circles when they ask, and I quote, “How many does your congregation worship?” The answer, I always thought, was supposed to be “one. We worship one God.” But in fact, worship attendance isn’t automatic in our culture the way it once was – it used to be you just went, like going to school, and didn’t question whether you’d show up. So the number of people in worship any given Sunday is not a bad gauge of spiritual commitment. How are we doing? I’d say our worship attendance is good but not great. Average attendance on Sunday mornings was 465, roughly 1/3 of the members on our rolls. But it’s up from last year; in 2010 attendance averaged 455. The first@five service could be larger, but it has hit critical mass, with a range of 25 – 45 people participating. In addition, the Sanctuary Choir is absolutely thriving, and now includes half a dozen college students; and Eggs Benediction continues to offer our high school youth an opportunity to sing. The children’s choirs hit record attendance in December; and they’re now preparing a musical on Noah’s ark to present on February 12.
- Are we *adding to our number* those who know the love of God through Jesus Christ? Membership, as I mentioned before, is increasing. So is the number of youth in our fellowship. The High School group added 20 members, rising from 67 to 87;

the Middle School group increased even more, from 12 to 38 members. The spirit in these groups is splendid too; they have become safe places to bring one's true self without judgment or fear. In addition, our college ministry is stronger than it's been in many, many years. In just a few months time, Jennifer Aycock, our seminary intern, has established terrific relationships with the students and staff of Lake Forest College. I don't know about you, but when my daughter went to college there was not much there for her spiritually. I'm so pleased we are reaching out to our young neighbors just across the street.

Or how about this measure? In Paul's letter to the Romans [12:2, 12-13], he writes:

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God. ... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.”

- How is our effort at “**being transformed by the renewing our minds to discern the will of God**”? Are we spending time in study and discernment? Our fall series, “Can You Believe It?” got great feedback as a helpful primer in the basics of faith, and we enjoyed a terrific turn-out for a workshop with Steve Plunkett, the author of the study we used. Our small group Bible Studies are doing well; while some are shrinking, others are growing; around 150 people participate in this vital part of our life together. Two planning teams spent a great deal of time assessing our needs for the future. A focus group has been meeting to explore a possible Center for Faith & Leadership, designed to equip leaders in civic, corporate and non-profit sectors with the wisdom, values and skills of the Christian tradition. At the same time, the Adult Faith Formation committee researched comparatively sized churches and has come with a recommendation to add a new position.

In the meantime, we continue to focus on children and youth faith formation. Amy Pagliarella led her team to engage in creative opportunities; for example, the recent event on the Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend – when families often travel – drew over 60 children.

Our youth ministry saw a leadership transition when Erik completed his two year contract; Nick Redmond has been with us since the fall. Already we've seen a huge surge in Middle School participation. When he planned the first overnight Lock-In, there was so much excitement that registrations tripled. This weekend the confirmation class is away on a retreat; 24 of the 26 youth are in attendance.

- How is our effort at “**persevering in prayer**”? Are we “**rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep**”? I think we're doing very well here. The decision to share Joys & Concerns in worship using written cards instead of microphones has generated a buzz; the question comes to Session again this spring. The Prayer Chain appreciates the written cards, and that ministry is dear to many. The women of the Prayer Shawl ministry gather to knit and pray every Tuesday

afternoon; and the Stephen Ministers are hard at work in one-on-one prayer partnerships with individuals in transition or sorrow.

- How well are we “contributing to the needs of the saints” within our congregation, as well as “extending hospitality to strangers”? This has been a good year for community-building in our fellowship. Parish Life committee and others have hosted events like the All Saints & Spirits party; Bill and Helen Loving gathered our members for quarterly dinners at Lake Forest Place; the Deacons hosted the Christmas Tea and the All Church Auction; and Membership Committee has worked to make this a welcoming place. An especially poignant way we continually “extend hospitality to strangers” is at funerals; the Chancel Guild and Deacons have shepherded numerous memorial services this year, some of them, like Ellie Burns’ and Sue Widner’s, were tragic indeed. Yet they are a way we reach out in compassion to the whole community.

Or finally, how about this measure? In Ephesians 4 we read:

“I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

- How are we doing in modeling a life “worthy of our calling”? Have we demonstrated “humility and gentleness” with each other? We went through numerous personnel changes this year. When Herb Smyers retired as Business Manager, John Johnson and his team picked up his entire job. When Kent Kinney dropped back his hours to one day a week, Donna Birney, the other pastors and I picked up the rest of his pastoral care work. When it looked like Erik Dailey would not be staying, the Personnel Committee worked extraordinarily hard – and quickly – to seek a new person to lead our youth, one whom we hope will stay with us for some time to come.
- When we dealt with other difficult issues, about which we disagree, have we been good about “bearing with one another in love”? I confess that at times I have been guilty of being frustrated with the intensity of opinions evident here. But then, last week, I had to laugh when Rabbi Moffic said, “whenever two Jews are present, there are three opinions.” It sounds just like this church! To the extent that we are able to use our disagreements to discern God’s will, then we are being very healthy indeed. When we simply try to out-shout one another, or dismiss the other’s opinion, or cut off the conversation, then we do a disservice to our witness as Christ’s people. I would give us a B this year on forbearance. But that means there’s room to grow!

In the end, the health of our church can never simply be about the numbers. The health of our church is not about popularity; it’s not even really about *us*. It’s not about how well the programs meet our needs, or how well we like the music; it’s not about whether we have a

bigger budget than the church down the road, or a larger youth program. The question is only this: are we bearing witness to the Lord Jesus Christ as well as we can?

The reality is that this congregation – and each of us within it - will always be imperfect. But the church has always been imperfect. Did you notice in our gospel lesson this morning, what a mixed report Simon Peter got from Jesus? Peter is the first to “get it” about who Jesus is; he is the *rock* on which all of Christendom would be built. Yet in the next breath, he doesn’t get it at all; he can’t see how it’s possible that Jesus should suffer; he wants success on earthly terms. And Jesus calls him a “stumbling block.” And so it is with us: if we are hoping this business of faith will be easy, if we’re hoping that being a church will make us feel good about ourselves; if we are hoping to skirt the hard demand of bearing the cross or even forbearing one another’s weaknesses ... well, then, we’re hoping for the wrong thing, and we will end up being a stumbling block to the real gospel, the gospel that gives life.

But if we’re willing to be used by Christ in ways that are desperately needed in this world, well, be prepared for awesome things. Because the stumbling block can just as easily become a stone: a rock, and a foundation, for the Kingdom of God to be built on this earth. We have a choice to make in the year ahead. We can be a stumbling block, or we can be a rock. I vote that we should be a rock: a sturdy foundation for the building of Christ’s kingdom in this world. But I’m not the only vote. What do you say?

ⁱ Rabbi Evan Moffic, Congregation Solel, Highland Park, Illinois, in his sermon at First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest, January 22, 2012.

ⁱⁱ James G. K. McClure, in his historic address to the congregation on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the church.