

LOVE OF PERENNIALS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, August 24, 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Best Place in the House Goes to the Pastor

So far this has been an unusual summer for me, dominated by weddings. I've done five with two more to go. Another unusual aspect is that sometimes I feel like a rent-a-minister. You don't know the couple at all; they just need somebody to get them hitched. Not so this summer. Among all seven of the couples are people whom I have known and loved for many years. Two of the seven include brides whom I baptized decades ago. I'm feeling that span of years.

However, one of the things about weddings is that they are indescribably priceless and enjoyable occasions for me as the officiating pastor. You have the best place in the house to observe a couple when they make promises to each other in the wedding vows. You get to see the tears in their eyes up close and personal. You can almost hear their hearts pounding inside them. You see them shake a little as they hold hands while making their vows. A covenantal promise is seriously beautiful.

Coming Honestly by the Notion of Covenant

I like the notion of covenant; I come by it rather honestly. It was drilled into my head from college on that God's covenantal love for us, God's unconditional promise, made multiple times to God's people, is the overriding basis that we have for any faith or hope that we have in the future. My pastor, back when I was in college, went beyond emphasizing the notion of covenant. He pounded it into my head; he made sure I got it. And that guy, my pastor from years ago, also came by it quite honestly. He was a graduate of Tübingen Theological Seminary, which is located in Basel, Switzerland.

One of the professors there happened to be a person by the name of Walther Eichrot. He was the author of a two-volume set on the "Theology of the Old Testament," so I had to study ad nauseam in seminary. The theme of that two-volume set was God's covenant: Everything that happened, from Genesis all the way through to Malachi – the minor Prophets, the Wisdom literature, the major Prophets, the historical works, the Pentateuch, all of that stuff, all of it interrelated, a marvelous body of literature – but underneath it all, the thread uniting it was God's covenantal promise, according to Eichrot.

A covenant is different from a contract. We put out a contract for painting the high windows around the sanctuary this summer. The deal, basically, was: You paint the windows; we pay

you money. It's rather simple: You don't paint the windows; you don't get the money. We refuse to pay money; he won't paint the windows. It's an ordinary contract, simply A then B.

A covenant, on the other hand, is one-sided. It says: I'm going to do something, and your reaction doesn't matter. You may like it or not. You may pay me money, or you can refuse. Your reaction is not part of the equation. I'm just going to do something, and I promise to do it. That's a covenant. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew for it is "berith olam." The "olam" is that eternity, infinity, cosmic word, and "berith" is "promise," so it means no matter where, no matter when, no matter what,

Here's the Promise:

A covenant was made with Adam. The garden is yours. We'd prefer it if you would be selective as to which fruit you're going to eat, but basically here's the garden. Enjoy.

A covenant was made with Noah. When you see the rainbow in the sky, remember that I am making a promise to you. Regardless of your behavior, never again will I destroy the Earth as I did with the flood.

A covenant was made with Abraham. This is probably the big one, the most encompassing one. I give you this land. Abraham had just traveled 400 miles from the Babylon area, which is like the Iran-Iraq area, all the way up to what is the Israel area now, 400 miles by foot. I give you this land flowing with milk and honey, and furthermore, your kids, your offspring, your progeny will be like the stars of heaven and the sand of the sea. There's no secondary clause in it. It's not *if* you're a good boy; I promise I'll do this. Period.

A covenant was made with Moses. This is the conditional one. It is not actually a covenant because it is contractual. I have freed you. I gave you the Ten Commandments. If you obey them, I'll be your God. Otherwise you're on your own, and you're out of luck.

A covenant was made with David. You shall be king to me forever unto all generations. And from your progeny, I will give you a Messiah.

Old and New Covenants Become Old and New Testaments

In old Bibles, turn-of-the-Twentieth-Century Bibles, for example, the title page at the very beginning, often says "Old Covenant" instead of "Old Testament," and instead of "New Testament," "New Covenant." It's a very important concept throughout our history of faith. In many ways the concept is similar to the long, long seven-foot tubes of Renaissance trumpets. The tube was very, very narrow until the end, where it flared out and became apparent to everybody. The concept was narrow with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Then suddenly, with the advent of the Messiah, it flared out to everybody.

In my opinion, the best covenantal story that I have ever come across in the Bible is the story of Hosea and Gomer. It's a short little book of fourteen chapters about Hosea's relationship with his wife by the name of Gomer. He's a Prophet, and he's told by God, to take for himself a particular woman as his wife. The problem was that she was a prostitute. So he obeys anyway and begins dating her, wooing her, trying to attract her. He finally succeeds and marries her. Unfortunately for Hosea, though, Gomer's character, personality, and predispositions lead her to be unfaithful, and she leaves him and goes after other men. He woos and wins her back only to find her leaving him again.

The whole point of this rigmarole is that it's undoubtedly not a literal story because these are the kinds of stories that, in a real two-by-four over-the-head style, are used to make a point to people. Attract this woman. Bring her back. Success. She comes back. And then she leaves him again. This is my relationship with you, God says to Israel. I love you stupidly. Unconditionally. Foolishly. Hopelessly. But I love you in a covenantal way. It's one-sided. She doesn't love him back, at least not consistently. And so he keeps drawing her back. Over and over and over again.

God's Love Is Foolish and Hopeless

Whether the story is literal or not is not the point. God foolishly, hopelessly loves his people.

There are modern examples, all based on promises:

The Presidential oath of office, specified in the Constitution, Article II, Section 1, Clause 8: "I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States and will, to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." At its core, it's gorgeous language. It's deep, but it's really simple too because at its core, it's saying, "I make a promise. I solemnly swear that I will do this."

The President's oath is witnessed by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, who earlier had said, "I, John Roberts, do solemnly swear that I will administer justice without respect to persons and do equal rights to the poor and to the rich, and that I will faithfully and impartially discharge and perform all the duties incumbent upon me as a Supreme Court Justice under the Constitution and laws of the United States, so help me God."

And then further down the line, John Roberts was chosen and confirmed by people who had made other promises.

Pledging a Troth Is Making a Promise

In about a month, I'm going to become a grandfather for the second time. We're really happy about it, excited, and a little nervous. It's to be a C-section; it's already scheduled, so it's going

to happen on a particular day. I performed the marriage service for this couple, my son and his wife, about three years ago.

One of the questions I asked him is about 200 years old: “Aaron, wilt thou have this woman to be thy wife? And wilt thou pledge thy troth to her in all love and honor and all duty and service and all faith and tenderness to live with her and cherish her according to the ordinance of God and the holy bond of marriage?” It’s the famous “I do” question.

Pledging a troth is a very old English way of simply making a promise. “Troth” is the root of “betrothed.” Traditionally the guy goes to his girl’s parents and asks for their blessing, and they “reluctantly” say, “Yes.” Then he goes to his girl, gets down on bended knee, and asks, “Will you marry me?” At that moment they’re betrothed, engaged. A commitment has been made, assuming that she says, “Yes, I will marry you.”

The Uncompromising Nature of a Sentence of Love

Then, just a short while later in that same service, also taking place so far five times this summer, this promise was made, “I, Aaron, take thee, Betsy Lee, to be my wife, and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses to be thy loving and faithful husband in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, and in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live.”

What I want you to notice, very seriously, is the covenantal, uncompromising nature of that sentence. “I take thee to be my wedded wife, and I do promise and covenant before God” and these people to do this. To be your “loving and faithful husband,” and then the whole rest of it is nothing but little parenthetical phrases that say pretty much, “No matter what.” Promises, covenantal promises. Indeed, our entire culture, our civilization is resting upon them. “I, Arthur, take thee, Tracy, to be my wedded wife, and I do promise and covenant before God.” Bob and Elizabeth. Catherine and Ethy. Toni and Marty. Lee and David. And so many others.

“O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”

Right after this sermon, we’re going to sing a hymn that is 100 percent covenant theology. It’s gorgeous, a lovely hymn: “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.” It was written by a Scottish cleric by the name of George Matheson, who wrote this about that hymn: “On the evening of the sixth of June, 1882, when I was 40 years of age, I was alone in the manse at the time. It was the night of my sister’s marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow.

“Something happened to me, which was known only to myself and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression of having it dictated to me by some inward voice rather than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes. I am equally sure that it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. I have no natural gift of rhythm. This came like a dayspring from on high.”

True to my nature, I was intrigued by the notion of five minutes, so I had to test it. I hand-wrote the four verses of the hymn, and it took me four and one-half minutes. But I was dealing with a ballpoint pen and not quill and ink. However, don't miss the covenantal promise found in the hymn: Love that won't let go. Actually, love that becomes all the more apparent in the darkest hour, during the travail of the soul. Love that *doesn't* let go because it made a promise. It is sacramental.

It's the same promise that's made at baptism. It's the same promise that's made at the communion table, when we take the bread and the wine. It's the same promise that the couple make, holding hands and making a vow to each other. It's the same promise that's made in an oath of office. It's a covenant. It's the foundation of our civilization.

The Hope of the World Is in an Unbroken Promise

When last I checked, which happened to be this morning, promises aren't always kept. Civilization's foundation does have some cracks. Presidents don't always do their best to defend the Constitution. Supreme Court Justices sometimes act as though they've never read it. And I'm not going to talk about Congress. Grooms and brides make promises, but then life intervenes and changes happen. Sometimes new people are met. Sometimes promises are broken. Sometimes promises are made that should never have been made, and thus they're broken almost naturally and automatically.

So the hope of the world is this: Covenantal love, the love that won't let us go, that continues to woo us back when we've been unfaithful is like the air we breathe, both within us and all about us. If we are fish, God's covenantal love is the ocean. Therefore, our job, is:

First, to realize covenantal love, to awaken it, to become enlightened in its presence, to be mindful of it.

Second, to relax into covenantal love, to let the blood pressure go down, to realize it's there no matter what, to know it not alone in your mind but also in your heart.

Third, emerging out of our mind and our heart, and thus, out of our soul, to reflect covenantal love, to nurture it, to impart it to others, to replicate it, to amplify it, to extend it, to be agents of it to others.

Never forget that covenantal love is rooted in an unbroken promise made to you by God.

Amen.