

**God's Restorative Justice
and Covenantal Love**

June 11, 2023

Hosea 5:15; 6:1-6

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June is often considered to be the month of weddings. A time when couples stand before family, friends and God and make vows “to love and to cherish, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health till death do we part.” There are many things we recite vows for. For example, “I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God.” If you become a citizen or hold office, you take a vow to uphold and defend the Constitution against all enemies. If you were ever a boy scout or girl scout you said a pledge at meetings, which I bet you can still recite today.

As a congregation we have new members say vows affirming the following: “Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ’s disciple, to follow in the way of our savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?”

When I was called to be your pastor, we held a ceremony with members of the Grand West Association. This covenant read: “I am willing, and promise to serve this church faithfully, preaching and teaching the word of God, administering the sacraments, and fulfilling the pastoral office, according to the faith and order of the United Church of Christ.” And in turn the congregation pledged: “We, the members of East Congregational Church receive Reverend Laretta Crelly as our pastor and teacher, promising to labor with her in the ministry of the gospel and give her due honor and support. We gather with her and with the United Church of Christ as a sign of our mutual ministry in Christ name.” We are in a covenantal relationship of mutual ministry here.

These are rituals that we hold as sacred commitments of the heart. They are different than a signed contract. Contracts are legal documents spelling out details of compensation for services rendered, but a covenant is a commitment of oneself to duty and honor before God.

I know many people who have served in the military or were raised in the scouts that still take great honor in upholding those pledges years later. Such pledges and covenants shape the way we function in the world. As humans, we strive to live up to them when taken seriously. We may struggle or even fail at some point, but still that sense of honor calls us to admit our struggles and rise up again and recommit. We call this confession of sin and repentance. As I said a few weeks ago, it is central to our faith and calling that Jesus told the disciples to do after his resurrection.

We are continuing series exploring God's creative ways of communication with our world. This is one of them – Covenantal language is one of the ways God communicates and is relational by nature. The origin of the Abrahamic faith tradition is a covenantal relationship to God. This vow started with Abraham and it was passed down to Isaac and Jacob and onto their descendants. When you read the stories of the Old Testament you will notice that time and again the people of God struggle to keep those vows and are unfaithful toward God. The Old Testament is full of writings from prophets from different times calling out the people for breaking those covenants and calling them back to faithfulness and justice.

Today's reading from the Prophet Hosea and the Psalm both lift up God's rejection of the worship of the people because they have broken covenant with God. The final verse of Hosea sums up God's complaint. "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

These words are reminiscent of other prophetic words such as Micah 6:7-8, "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? God

has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?”

There is an emphasis in scripture especially in the prophets of calling out performative religiosity as false when injustice is abounding. The prophets consistently lift acts of righteousness as a standard by which one is faithfully serving God. This continues in the New Testament when John the Baptist calls out the religious leaders coming to be baptized accusing them of performative piety. He demands that they prove their repentance by “bearing fruit worthy of repentance.” meaning they need to repent of their unjust practices.

When Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment he responds with similar words. “Love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” This combining of two commandments as the essence of faith ties our worship of God to our treatment of our neighbor. In fact, Jesus says that following these two commands you will by default fulfill all the law and the prophets. The apostle John expounds upon this in his first letter chapter 4 when he says, “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:20-21)

As a community of faith we are seeking to grow in knowledge and devotion toward God and grow in our love for one another. This means when we are in the wrong, we find ways to restore the relationship and bring healing. When we see injustice happening our faith calls us to speak out and seek ways to bring justice and healing. Our faith is centered on healthy and restorative relationships with God and with one another.

We are called to be the church – to Love God, Love one another and Love ourselves. We are called to a covenantal bond with God and one another. In closing let me read a

poem called "How to Love a Church." Written by my wife Amy, from her book of lectionary readings.

Second Sunday after Epiphany

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 1 Corinthians 12:7

How to Love a Church

Wash your cup after coffee hour.

Greet a guest, join the choir,
teach the children.

Agree to serve on a committee.

Bring your talents, bring your energy,
bring your enthusiasm,
put your money in the plate,
show up for services,
show up.

Show up,
not because the doors are open
but because the invitation is open
to bring your whole self
to the gathering of selves
and dare to be challenged,
informed, inspired,
to be the one who challenges,
informs, inspires,
to be the presence that only you can bring
to the Beloved Community
in the tradition of the Spirit
of Love.

And love.
Do the hard stuff.
Stay in the room with the crying baby,
with the adult who glares at the crying baby,
with that person who gets on your last nerve.

Love the whole congregation,
stay in the conversation
even when you disagree,
especially when you disagree.
Stay because you disagree,

and leave
because love can mean knowing
when to wipe the dust and go
when to say no.

And know within yourself
when you've been wrong,
when being strong feels more like bending,
like picking up the threads and mending,
like finding new instead of ending
and tending things you find surprising.

And find
to your surprise
that all the ways to love a church
are the same as all the ways to love yourself.

Greet a guest and show up,
be ready for the glow up,
you might even need to grow up,
proclaim your no, and sew up,
and wash
your own
damn
cup.

From Another Scroll: Defiant Readings
for Lectionary C By Amy GSA Brooks
26 Pilgrim Press 2021 p.26-27