

Bound Together By Covenant

Acts 6:1-7

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I am often asked by people of other faith traditions to describe what makes the United Church of Christ unique, what are its defining characteristics. Near the top of the list is the theological term, ‘covenant.’ A covenant, in our tradition, is a sacred agreement that binds people of faith together for the purpose of doing ministry and mission in the world. A covenant spells out how we are committed to each other and how we’ll support each other as we seek to discern God’s call in our lives. When I was installed as a pastor and teacher in this church, we made a covenant. I promised to be a good shepherd. You promised to pray for me. I promised to be a worship leader and a Confirmation teacher. You promised to partner with me in these and other ministries. Together, we promised to be the church of Jesus Christ. We’ve been living out that covenant ever since.

Before we were the United Church of Christ, we were known as the Congregational Church. Our Congregational roots go back to the Mayflower and the Pilgrims who had separated themselves from a church in England where everything had become a little too tight, a little too regimented, a little too hierarchical. As the Mayflower anchored off what would become Plymouth, Massachusetts, those on board decided to enter a sacred covenant with each other. The Mayflower Compact calls for everyone to have a voice, for everyone’s authority to be honored, for the clergy and the laity to share fully in the cost and joy of discipleship. In South Glastonbury, we are the inheritors of the Mayflower Compact specifically, and of the theological notion of ‘covenant’ generally.

Both of the Biblical texts for today have to do with forming covenants. Now Jacob and Laban lived together for many years as son-in-law and father-in-law. Their relationship might be described as ‘stormy’ at best. It was marked by trickery. Laban had forced Jacob to work seven years for his daughter Rachel’s hand in marriage. But on the wedding night, the bride turned out to be, Leah, the older sister! And Jacob had to work another seven years to wed his beloved Rachel. Later, tending his father-in-law’s sheep, Jacob manipulated the breeding rituals to ensure that he would emerge in the spring with a larger flock than he deserved. Back and forth, they were “at” each other.

In the end, it became clear that a good peace-making strategy would be for these two men and their families to support each other by each going their separate ways. But they were related by marriage, shared children and grandchildren, had every reason to wish the very best for the other. So Laban and Jacob blessed each other at a place called Mizpah, looking each other in the eye, and saying aloud with full hearts, “May the Lord watch between thee and me while we are absent one from the other.” It’s one of the earliest covenants recorded in Scripture. In simple language, these two prayed for God to bless the other as each moves into an unknown future. A covenant can be as simple as that, as simple as two agreeing to pray for each other.

This covenant at Mizpah is a covenant that parents and their college-bound children might say to each other. May the Lord watch between thee and me while we are absent one from the other. It’s a covenant a church might share with its minister when she goes off on a sabbatical leave. It’s a covenant two partners might share when one goes off to military service. May the Lord watch between thee and me while we are absent one from the other.

The second Biblical passage for today takes us to life in the earliest days of the Christian church. Those first apostles labored mightily to do everything that needed doing: to be worship leaders, to be healers, to be evangelists, to be teachers, to be custodians of the treasury, to settle disputes, everything that arose in the life of the church. Of course, in no time, this exhausted them! This leadership style wasn't working! So, they did what good Congregational Churches do today, they called a meeting! They talked about all the demands for ministry and mission that were arising, all the needs for leadership, and about the apostles' limited capacity to do it all. So, they proposed a covenant, a new way of being the church, a new way of serving Christ together. Leadership would be shared and all would support each other.

Seven were selected to be deacons. The deacons would oversee the daily distribution of bread. This would be their covenanted ministry. They were called up to the front one Sunday morning. The apostles laid their hands on them and blessed them. And the whole congregation vowed to support the seven in their sacred work.

It's not hard to imagine how subsequent covenants came into being. A building was erected, so trustees covenanted to keep it painted. Parents brought their children, so teachers covenanted to pass along the salvation story to the next generation. The sick and wounded kept showing up, so a team of healers covenanted to do this ministry. Teenagers called out for attention, so a covenant was formed among adult advisors. God kept nudging the churches to be more and more inclusive, more and more responsive to human needs, more and more alive to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, 'covenant' is one of the primary theological concepts that binds us together today. This is how I would begin to identify the uniqueness of our denomination. We can't all be missionaries in Malawi, so we covenant with the Sisters of St. Mary who can.

We can't all operate homeless shelters, so we covenant with brothers and sisters who run the South Park Inn. We can't all run schools of theology, so we covenant with Ephrim Agosto and the Hartford Seminary faculty. We can't all operate health clinics, so we covenant with the Hartford Gay and Lesbian Health Collective. We can't all go off to Mexico on medical missions, so we covenant with Dr. Minh Han.

At the Last Supper, Jesus spoke to his disciples about living into a new covenant, a covenant that would be sealed in his own blood, a covenant that would promise eternal life, a covenant that would call for men and women everywhere to love more deeply, to care more creatively, to welcome more lavishly, and to give more abundantly. In the United Church of Christ, we strive to be a covenanting people. I wanted to share this reflection with you this morning as a theological grounding for the Four-Way Covenant we are about to form, and also as a vision for ministry as we imagine moving into our new building in August. In the greatest of hope, I say, Amen!