

March 27, 2022 - Lent 4C

“Covenant Part 3 - What Is The Good News, and So What? - To proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people” - © Rev. Dr. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Deuteronomy 32:1-7; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; Matthew 28:16-20

For way too long now, and I mean centuries, the American church has been completely dependent on enforcing **what to believe** rather than **who we follow** and **how to follow**. We are now paying the costs of that focus as a nation, and as a faith. If you ask a young person why they don't go to church, it is most often because they perceive the church is only concerned with what to believe and the judgments that go with those beliefs. If, after having not gone to church for many years, the only information they get about church is from the news, there is not a lot to like about what Christians believe. Very little of it has to do with Jesus. But if you are concerned about manufactured concerns about transgendered people using bathrooms or playing in sports, enforcing freedom at the end of a barrel of a gun, how to define a man and a woman and who has control in the house, and a whole bunch of other ideas that do a good job of denigrating whole classes of people, then there are plenty of religious people on television to tell you how to perform all these anger issues. I wouldn't go to church either if this is all I knew about church.

But in the back of that young person's head (it isn't just a young person issue anymore, though...), there may be a fluttering thought that the Jesus they learned about in a few Sunday school classes their grandparents brought them to is not about any of those things on television and the internet. Maybe, just maybe, following Jesus and sharing that with other people has absolutely nothing to do with manufactured culture wars designed to tear countries apart. Maybe, just maybe, following Jesus has nothing to do with **what we believe** when we are sharing the presence of Christ with others. Maybe it has way more to do with *who and how* questions

So when we consider our church covenant, I think it is important to work backwards into what to believe from who and how we believe. The outcome may be very, very different than what the culture right now wants you to think. Up to now, we have looked at the meaning of a covenant, a promise. We learned that the value of a promise is that it is fulfilled by both parties, and that God is in the business of often making one-sided promises that have been fulfilled in the history of the faith. Then, we examined what it means to have an individual will, free will, if you will, and how God's will is different from human will. There, we learned that to follow God's will means following Jesus to learn how God's will acts in the world. In Scripture, we get stories of how this looks and what it means for us in our consideration of how things work in the world. Last week, we talked about the different ways of the Lord and saw that there are many, but sometimes certain walks with the Lord take precedence for communities of faith. I suggested that walking with Jesus along the Emmaus Road might be a good starting point, beginning with reflecting on the phrase, *We had hoped*. This week, we are discussing what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and to covenant with one another to be such a thing.

We say,

We covenant with God and with one another...to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people

What, then, shall we proclaim? Will it be doctrine? A slate of beliefs we all must adhere to? Some churches do indeed do that. The expectation in some churches is that you must agree to all the tenets of

the Apostles Creed or the longer Nicene Creed. Others expect you to conform to, say, the Heidelberg Declaration or the Book of Concord or the Westminster Confession. My favorite is the Methodist “Book of Discipline”. They make it clear in the title - deviation from the Book of Discipline requires...discipline to be back in the good graces of the church. Or perhaps there is a single point of authority that relies on an uninterrupted tradition and interpretive way, which speaks to the practices and beliefs of the church in any given age. This is what a Pope does. There are a variety of good reasons to do things this way. Everyone who gathers has a common understanding of how things work and what is generally believed. Any question has authorities - presbyteries, bishops, supervisors, directors - a church or person can appeal to for answers and guidance. Believe me, after the last two years, there is nothing I wanted more than a higher authority to appeal to in order to make health decisions for the church. It would have made things much easier to simply say, “Our bishop says wear a mask”.

Doctrine and beliefs matter. They define individuals and communities. They help us create meaning out of very complex things like Bibles and traditions and human interactions. But somehow, between the time when Jesus hung out with the disciples and ascended into heaven after the Resurrection, and now, we have flipped the tables. Doctrine and belief is what we came to after our experience with Jesus, were we to have lived back then with him and the original disciples, which makes both doctrine and belief fluid, dynamic, ever-changing. But now doctrine and belief come first for many followers of Jesus. Believe these things, then you may or may not have an experience of the presence of Christ. Maybe you will; maybe you won't. But the problem is that most people these days want an experience, not a docket of beliefs to adhere to. No one will come to a church that is concerned about doctrine, unless the concern of that person was doctrine in the first place.

“The Christian faith is not primarily a thought; it is primarily an act--an act of Love invading history to redeem us.” - E. Stanley Jones

Congregationalism is different from those other ways of church. It is concerned with the **who** and the **how** of faith, first and foremost. Notice that in Jesus' Great Commission, which is what Matthew 28 is often called, all the words are action words. The Commission is a call to *do something*, not a call to *believe something*. What does Jesus ask the disciples to **do**? It is only after a disciple *does* or bears witness to something done in the name of Christ that they begin to understand what to believe. Experience always precedes belief. At its best, a congregationally organized church understands this.

In the Great Commission, Jesus asks the disciples to “Go and *make disciples*”. *Disciple* is the Greek word for ‘*student*’. So when we make a disciple we are making a person who studies something. What do we study if we have been made a disciple of Jesus? According to our covenant for our Congregational church, we study the will of God as taught in the Holy Scriptures and how to walk in the ways of the Lord.

Jesus also tells the disciples to baptize people. Baptism is the symbolic gesture that welcomes a person into becoming a student of Jesus. Then Jesus tells the disciples to **do** what he does.

What does Jesus actually do?

According to the Great Commission, Jesus teaches. Teaching is the act of passing down to others that which you have learned from those above or before you. In this way, those who know less learn more from those who know more, and then they teach those who know less so they can know more. The Great Commission is a generational gift, not an individual thing that a person does. This is part of why

‘evangelizing’ has gone so wrong in America. For generations, the Great Commission has been taught as a way of converting individuals to the faith so they believe in a particular way. It is not that at all, at least according to the words on the page. Instead, the Great Commission is a way of welcoming people into gathering, supporting, receiving, teaching, sharing, and loving others, without partiality.

1 Corinthians 11 makes what we are teaching and learning pretty simple. What Paul is speaking about here is called “*liturgy*”. We understand the word to mean the rituals of the church, but in Greek, the translation of “liturgy” is “*the work of the people*”. Paul says, *This is what I have received, what I have been taught, what I know, and this is what I am passing on to you.* He is passing on **A thing to do, a way of being** with one another. Any belief or doctrine in what Paul is about to say derives out of what has been done. The belief and doctrine do not enforce the doing. Belief and doctrine are derivative from what has been done and is being done.

Knowledge was passed down from one generation to another in the early church by way of the act of communion. Communion in the early church was not the several minute ritual it has become in the church of today. Instead, communion was literally a reenactment of the Last Supper. The altar space would be filled with food. People would come up and take some of the food and share it with one another. They would talk and eat and drink. All the left-over food would go home to impoverished families.

Faith and meaning all built around one act and one act alone in the early church - *gathering around the table*. Martin Luther understood this and titled his most popular book “Table Talk”. This was a little book for families to use at the table with topics to discuss, like a book with discussion questions at the end. All the ‘table talks’ were faith related. The short essays were meant to be read out loud and then discussed with family and friends around the table. Luther was trying to recover this ancient practice from the early church. Why? Because for the follower of Jesus Christ, there is one best place to talk about the Good News of Jesus Christ, and that is around the table while sharing food and drink together. Table talk is faith talk for the disciple of Jesus. The Great Commission, and our covenant of proclamation, should always lead to the table, always lead to communion.

When we talk of faith around the table, part of what we do is what Deuteronomy says. We *remember the days of old; consider the years long past.*

We reminisce and share good memories. We allow the past to influence the present. We talk about it. This is what is meant by ‘table talk’. We, as it is in the French, *souvenir*. Souvenir is the French verb for ‘to remember’. In English, we have turned the word into a noun. Nouning verbs and verbing nouns is always insulting to people of learning, so I am pretty sure this is why the English did this to the French word. I think the English nouning of the French verb is onto something important, though. It is so much easier to remember actions, relationships, and objects than it is to remember an idea, a dogma, or a doctrine. ‘Table talk’ is the collecting of souvenirs, remembrances, of what we had hoped for and what has come to pass, as the disciples along the Emmaus road did last week. Memory is best when connected with a sense, like smell, a movement, like walking, an action, like sharing a meal together, and a relationship, like Jesus with his disciples. All of this is what happens on Emmaus Road. The disciples are *souveniring* with Jesus. This is Good News.

But ‘table talk’, ‘faith talk’, proclamation, also looks forward. God presses God’s people always into the future. This is why faith and belief are fluid things. They change over time, according to the times. As they change, we seek to walk with the Lord and with Jesus. This is Good News.

The Good News of Jesus Christ, then, is

- Foundational
 - Remembering the history of the church
 - Remembering the history of our tradition
 - Holding up the faith of the saints who have gone before us
- Action-oriented
 - Reflecting on what we have done
 - Reflecting on what we are doing
 - Considering deeply what we will do
- Community-focused
 - Focused on the inner community and how to become a better student of Jesus’
 - Focused on the outer community and how to better reflect the love of God and Christ to others
 - Focused on the spiritual community and how to create a place where the presence of the Holy Spirit can be best experienced

The word ‘*Proclaim*’ in our covenant is best understood, I think, as ‘*enthusiastic conversation around a dinner table*’ rather than what it now means, which is something like a preacher standing in a pulpit preaching or a person holding a sign on a street corner yelling. Even our Pilgrim and Puritan foreparents understood the value of table conversation. All church services were a gathering place to find out what to talk about around the dinner table. That is because table talk is where radical ideas for the future happen. After all, it is around a dinner table that Jesus announced his Resurrection. More importantly, though, the table is where the simple gifts of providing for one’s neighbor, caring for those who are in mourning, the simple act of being with another person in gentleness and love can happen. The actions we take in relationships and in the world begin at the table, at least when we are seeking to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

That is why we ‘*proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to all people*’. All people are invited to our table, where we talk about faith and share the love of God with tax collector, drunkard, leper, or any other person without partiality. Thinking of communion in the way we have been talking, and thinking of the Good News as gathering with one another and with Christ at the table, changes the standardized ritual of sharing the bread and the cup into a liturgy, a work of the people, that teaches us, that disciples us, into how to be at the table and to invite to the table whomsoever is in need of the care and love of Christ. We allow the liturgy to influence how and with whom we come to the table.

And this is the Good News we are proclaiming. That Jesus has broken down the barriers between male and female, gentile and Jew, believer and non-believer, straight and queer, cis and trans, ethnicities and colors, liberal and conservative. Now we all sit at the Jesus table in fellowship with one another, seeking to have a faith that loves and trusts and hopes in the dignity and promise of a God-centered life, and understanding that “*Wherever there is freedom, there is Christ*” (Gal 5).

We have yet to say a single word about what to believe. But why does any of this matter? So the Good News is that we invite anyone to our table to share in the fellowship we share with God and Christ? So what?

We can only answer that question for ourselves, individually and as a church. We are the 'So what?' of Jesus' Great Commission. Jesus, at least in this reading, is all about the *doing* of the faith. We answer the So What? in our actions with one another and the liturgy - the work of the people - we share. We answer the question in our relationships within these walls and out in the community. We answer the So What? in this place and these acts we do together.

How do we want to be remembered, *souvenired*, as students of Jesus? What will we do? How will we fulfill our promise to have an enthusiastic table talk with all peoples about the Good News we have learned from Jesus Christ?

Amen.