

Sermons from Park Hill: November 9, 2008

**Sermons from
Park Hill Congregational UCC
Denver, Colorado**

**Rev. Dr. David Bahr
pastor@parkhillchurch.org**

November 9, 2008

**Joshua 24: 13-25
“Commitments to Our Covenants”**

One of the most joyous times in a church's life is a baptism – a baby or an adult. Whether it's a parent or an individual, certain questions are asked, certain vows are expressed, promises are exchanged. When meeting with parents, I try to emphasize that their vow stretches from baptism through confirmation, at a minimum. When we ask, “will you lead this child to make a decision for him or herself one day,” the most important part of the promise is not the part about letting them choose, but to lead them, to guide them toward choices that follow from experience in the community of faith. In other words, bring 'em to church. It's not a promise to let them do whatever they feel like. It's a promise to be proactive – to educate and nurture them in the church. That's the covenant.

Talitha Arnold, the pastor of the United Church in Santa Fe, said that if she were to be as blunt as Joshua when presenting the choice to commit to a baptismal vow, she would get rid of the wimpy declaration from our book of worship: Do you promise to grow with this child in the Christian faith and offer to him or her the nurture of the Christian church? Instead, she said, “I'd ask them, in front of God and the whole congregation, “Do you promise to get him or her out of bed, dressed, and here every Sunday morning for the next 18 years, even when you've had a long week or you'd rather sleep in or there's a soccer match or when this darling infant has grown into a surly, tattooed teenager who thinks church is dumb?”¹

Or how about a membership vow like this: Instead of theological niceties like fellowship and supporting one another on a shared discovery of our spiritual gifts, how about “Will you stick with the church when it doesn't feel as interesting anymore; and will you promise not to complain when a request for money to fix the boiler comes right after a special offering for hurricane relief that comes just before someone asks you to help them move tables for the upcoming rummage sale, as well as any items you can donate for the rummage sale; and will you commit to forgiving the minister for a few bad sermons on top of forgetting your birthday; and will you...” And you get the idea.

¹ Talitha Arnold, “True Grit,” *The Christian Century*, October 23-November 5, 2008.

Sermons from Park Hill: November 9, 2008

Can you really commit to this community? Are you sure you can fully commit to your infant's spiritual life? Will you commit yourself to God, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, for richer and for poorer? Yes, we can. Joshua would quickly chime in, "No, you can't." You will fail. *No, we can do it!* No, you can't. Like a taunt.

Despite this being a great statement of affirmation, Walter Bruegeman states bluntly, as for me and my house... "This is not a good church growth text." This is a text that will drive people away because it asks them to be accountable, to be witnesses of their own promises. And this is probably a terrible text right in the middle of a stewardship campaign. Don't make a pledge you won't keep. My apologies to the committee.

Joshua knew who he was dealing with. He was the one anointed by Moses to lead the people after his death into the long awaited Promised Land, across the Jordan River. Joshua took leadership for the Israelites, who we are well aware, had previously failed at almost every turn in their covenants with God. They had among other things, you may remember, created a golden calf to worship almost immediately after receiving the Ten Commandments, which begins at the very top with "you shall have no other gods before me." This was not buried in the fine print. It wasn't number 8. It's right up front. I am your God and you are my people.

Today's text is right at the end of the Book of Joshua and the end of his life. The Book of Joshua is all about the transition of the Israelites into landowners – land, of course, which belonged to other people before they took possession – but, nonetheless, they were finally settling down. This is his farewell speech. After years of wandering around in the wilderness, they were now able to grow vineyards, sow fields of wheat, plant trees – the basic things of living a settled life instead of a nomadic existence. When you are in your own home, you are freer to look beyond basic survival needs; to get comfortable, choose a good decorator and finally put holes in the walls after years of renting. They now had stability after 40 years of wilderness and 400 years before that of slavery.

Aware of his own mortality, now at 110 years old, he called together all the leaders of the tribes of Israel – everybody who was anybody was there. They met at Shechem, which is a literal passageway between two mountains; it's a strategic military position. But that day it served as a spiritual passageway where they are given a choice. Will you serve the gods of your ancestors and foreign lands or the Lord, Yahweh, the God of Israel, who led you out of slavery into this new land? Just to remember who this god really is, Joshua recited a long litany of things Yahweh had done for them, concluding with fields you didn't plant and houses you didn't build. If you will serve your God, then just put all those other gods away. Joshua didn't tell them to bring all those statues they had stashed away in their luggage to the center of town so they could build a huge bonfire. There was no big spectacle about the matter. Just put them away

Sermons from Park Hill: November 9, 2008

and incline your heart to God. That is, if they decided, if they made a choice, to serve Yahweh.

I can't really tell if their response was kind of "yeah, sure. I guess so." I've certainly made commitments that sounded about that enthusiastic! So I don't know if it was their lackadaisical attitude or the evidence of their past that caused Joshua to fake them out. He gets them all together for a special meeting, presents the business of the day, gives them all the reasons to make the right decision, pumps up the crowd, and then he asks them if they will - and then tells them they can't. Maybe it was reverse psychology. If I tell them they can't, they'll work overtime to prove me wrong. For whatever reason, Joshua tells them they can't be faithful. But, yes we can. We don't always want to.

You know I was joking when I made fun at the beginning about bringing children to church when they'd rather play video games or you'd rather do something else. Or was I? You know I was just making fun at the beginning when I talked about committing to the church when the plate is passed and the rummage sale is announced - and when Sunday school teachers are needed and weeds have to be pulled and someone needs an encouraging phone call and someone just out of the hospital needs a meal and a guest needs a smile. If I have to, or, I'll do it, if...

I'll be faithful if or until... Commitment doesn't mean much until our spouse or partner has deeply disappointed us. Commitment doesn't mean much until there doesn't seem to be anything exciting about the relationship anymore. Commitment doesn't mean much until I feel like too much is being asked of me. But covenants are not made for those times when it feels good; covenants are made for those times when everything seems to be going wrong.

Faithfulness to God is easy when things are going our way. How about choosing on the day when we discovered we have cancer? How about choosing on the day when we lost our job? How about choosing on the day when we didn't win an election?

There seems to be an urgency to Joshua's question. Choose *this* day. But no decision is done and over at the moment it's made. We grow and change. Things in the world come and go. Joshua might have better said, choose every day - when you get up and consider all that will be coming at you this day, choose; and when you go to bed, remembering all that has happened this day, choose. Again. Being a Christian is choosing to be so every time you'd rather not - when it's not convenient, when we'd like to do whatever we want instead of asking, cliché or not, what would Jesus do. Being a Christian is much more meaningful than that, but at the end of the day, commitment and follow-through with our *chosen* obligations brings a kind of satisfaction that does not come

Sermons from Park Hill: November 9, 2008

with escaping responsibility. Or simply drifting away.

I remember a membership class of ten people I had a few years ago. At the end of a wonderful time of bonding and celebrating the choice they had all made together, I told them that by the end of the first year, two of them would, based on experience, have already left the church. At the end of two years, another two or three would be gone. And that at the end of ten years, maybe only one of them would still be an active member. It was a shocking and sobering moment. It wasn't meant to embarrass them but to acknowledge how hard it is in our society to keep commitments. If half of all marriages end in divorce, perhaps we should all invite Joshua to the ceremony to shout out after "I do," "no you can't" just to be sure we are aware of the significance and challenge of faithfulness. This is not to blame the parties involved. This is not to embarrass people into staying in abusive relationships. This is not to stop us from questioning whether this is really the right place for me to belong. Commitment isn't a command to not change, to not grow. But don't let our disposable society – filling our landfills with junk – affect our commitments and covenants and promises and vows.

Joshua tells the people he won't be around to keep reminding them of their covenant vows. When he gathered together all the leaders of the tribes of Israel, he told them that if indeed they did choose to serve Yahweh, they would have to be their own witnesses. He would no longer be

there to hold them accountable to their own choices. He placed a stone in the ground so that when they saw it, they could be reminded of their promises and judge their own conduct – which is the only way it works.

We must choose well. And choose, we must. This day. Every day. Why? Because covenants are not made for those times when it feels good; covenants are made for those times when everything seems to be going wrong, when we don't care anymore. Are you agonizing over some choice today? Challenged by a commitment? Confounded by a covenant? Pained by a promise? Some things do and must change for the sake of our health and sanity. We will make mistakes. But make no mistake, God chooses you. This day. And every day.

I don't know about you, but today, once again, I choose you to be my community and God to be my God.