

The Unfinished Church
A Sermon for Pilgrim Church
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Scripture Readings

Jeremiah 31:31-34

31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus[a] told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. 2 He said, “In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. 3 In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, ‘Grant me justice against my accuser.’ 4 For a while he refused, but later he said to himself, ‘Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, 5 yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.’”[b] 6 And the Lord said, “Listen to what the unjust judge says. 7 And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? 8 I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”

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Okay wouldn't it be nice to be done? A certain member of our household has a ton of homework this semester. And it's never done. The student has to keep working, learning, practicing. Tenacity and persistence.

But wouldn't it be nice to be finished? To have the quick fix, the matter resolved, once and for all?

One decision, one covenant, one moment of justice.

If only. Jesus says, pray always and do not lose heart. To a hurting people, Jesus says: pray always and do not lose heart. Jeremiah, writing to a people in crisis, says here is a new covenant. A new promise, a new hope. The days are surely coming. But the days are long, and difficult. Here is a new covenant, not a quick fix but a new covenant.

So just to say - despite these texts both being in the lectionary for the same day - the connection between them is tenuous. But I think it's there. These are words of hope for people in tough times. Neither speak of a quick fix, but rather of longterm practices and renewing commitments. Jesus' word is encouragement to pray at all times and not lose hope. Jeremiah's word is of renewed covenant.

Let's talk about covenant for a moment.

I spoke with two different Pilgrim leaders recently, who each said something surprising.

I don't know what covenant means, one said. It's a religious word that isn't clear to me.

I didn't know Pilgrim Church has a covenant for communications, the other one said.

I love talking about covenant so this gives me a great opening.

Covenant is one of the foundations of church life.

Covenant is a bond and covenant is a sacred promise. In a congregation, it's a way of being in sacred community with one another.

In the words of Walter Brueggemann - the late and beloved UCC Biblical scholar - Covenant is "a way of being committed to each other as God is committed to us. A way of being defined by, accountable to, and responsible for each other."

Covenants go all the way back. Like, all the way back. God made a covenant with creation in the days of Noah and set a rainbow in the sky to remind God's own self of that eternal covenant. When God covenants with people, God self-limits. God said I will never again cause the floods to cover the earth? So covenant includes self-limits and a commitment to the other. God renews covenant several times in the Hebrew Bible including the new (which is to say renewed) covenant Jeremiah speaks of, and the new covenant Jesus speaks of at the last supper. So covenant is about self-giving, too.

The new covenant Jeremiah describes and the new covenant in Jesus are signs that God is always working to meet us. The new covenant that Jesus speaks of, which is represented by his broken body in the sacrifice God-in-Christ is willing to make as an expression of love for God's children, is not a sign of the overturning of the covenant with the Jewish people. God's love and God's covenant are steadfast. They're expressed anew with every generation and every faithful people. Covenant is *worth* applying in new ways in new circumstances. In every age and with every faithful people, God is still speaking. Our understandings of and expressions of God's covenant are ways in which our faith grows and changes over time.

Covenant, as Brueggemann prays, “sets off possibilities for renewal, restoration and response.”¹

Covenant is not just something that happens between God and humanity. Covenant binds communities to other communities. Covenant binds the people of one community together.

In the UCC, covenant is what we’ve got.

There are traditions where an external authority defines belief, prescribes liturgy and makes decisions. Within the UCC, we have neither creed nor mandatory words nor external hierarchy. We have covenant.

Congregationalists might say, what we’ve got is autonomy. Jane Fisler Hoffman, UCC conference minister, says it this way: “The UCC operates within our triple but often conflictive commitments to individual freedom, to congregational autonomy, and to covenantal life.”² To quote Walter Brueggemann again, covenant “eschews both authoritarianism and autonomy...insists that we are members one of another, pledged to solidarity across ideological lines and prepared to live in sustained engagement...”³

The UCC has a video series on church history and structure. One of the speakers says, covenantal polity - which is the UCC’s structure - is “the best part of who we are when we are working well together, and one of our greatest challenges at times. It means we care deeply for everyone in the system...Covenant to me is expressed in promise and relationship...we love one another, passionately, like a family. Families are not always easy.”⁴

¹ “C Is for Covenant,” ALPHABET OF FAITH: Prophetic Prayers for a Chaotic World by Walter Brueggemann. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2025

² P.13, *Covenant: A Study Guide* by Jane Fisler Hoffman. Cleveland: United Church Press, 2008

³ Foreward, *Covenant: A Study Guide* by Jane Fisler Hoffman. Cleveland: United Church Press, 2008

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/238496593>

In the wider church context, the national setting covenants to speak to the congregations, not on behalf of. And, the local churches covenant to listen carefully.

In the local church setting (in other words, right here at Pilgrim Church), this is also what we try to do.

We're non-hierarchical and I don't tell you what to believe. Individuals come to their own creeds, so to speak, which usually change over time. And as a community, sometimes through our representative Council or committees, sometimes in gatherings of the congregation, we make decisions in covenant. These also sometimes get revisited.

When folks join Pilgrim Church, we say this: "We welcome you with joy into the common life of this church. We promise you our friendship and prayers as we share the hopes and labors of the church of Jesus Christ." Promise. That's a covenant.⁵

Another example of our life in covenant with one another is our Covenant for Communications. It was written by our Church Council just after I arrived six years ago, and we've used it to begin every congregational meeting since then. We've got some new folks, you might never have heard this read aloud.

"In this meeting, we will seek the Spirit's wisdom as we reflect on, and make decisions about, the ministry of Pilgrim Church.

We will

- Look for joy, reinforce our strengths, and recognize the accomplishments of this community
- Listen with care in order to understand
- Practice loving communication

⁵ To make this sermon more concise I decided not to go into a history of Congregational church covenants, such as the Salem Covenant, nor examples of contemporary covenants such as those of the Southern New England Conference of the UCC, the UCC Ministers' Code, the covenant I set with my classes, various clergy covenant groups, or LICA. Maybe next time!

- Work to be transparent, clear, and concise in our words
- Try to walk in one another's shoes
- Pause, breathe, and pray if a moment feels challenging
- Look and listen for God in each other
- Assume good intentions
- Collaborate together to bless our neighbors and community
- And be open to constructive feedback offered for the common good."

Those are the promises we repeat to each other. This is how we promise to be together. And these words aren't complete, they don't cover every situation even within our own congregation. In the Listening Circle process we'll start with these ideas and probably add some more.

Covenant is always grounded in relationship. And covenant is worth practicing - by practice I mean in the way musicians have to practice regularly. As Elena and Elizabeth have noted about the Listening Circles, our practice will be as much about how we work together and speak together and discern together in covenant as it will be about the topic we consider. Sometimes it's really hard when things are tender. So we will remember the love and kindness and history we share. We will try, and because we are imperfect human beings, sometimes we will do it better than other times.

Human communities don't seem to like conflict. And in the UCC sometimes we point to our touchstone scripture (John 17, That they may all be one) as if it is a description rather than a prayer. Turns out that before the UCC came into being in 1957 some Congregationalists filed a lawsuit attempting to stop the merger. Many Congregational churches actually left the denomination at our founding. The UCC has spent the seven decades since trying to figure out how to behave together. To the extent that we are any form of one, we have also experienced division and development and change. So we are a "reformed and reforming" tradition. God is still speaking, and we are still trying to listen, and to love one another. We are an unfinished church.

We know that Pilgrim Church is unfinished, too. So we practice, and we try, and we reach out to one another.

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Walter Brueggemann says it this way: “Covenant insists that we are members one of another, pledged in solidarity across ideological lines, and prepared to live in sustained engagement with each other....Covenant is the recognition that all members stand in accountability to a will and purpose” beyond our own - God’s own will and purpose.⁶

Covenant binds imperfect people imperfectly, but in love and promise.

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Now, back to the Gospel for the day.

Jesus says, God is not like an unjust judge. God responds to our cries and our yearnings swiftly, beautifully. And mysteriously, too - sometimes it’s hard to perceive God’s answers, sometimes God’s answers leave us with more questions. But God, whose name is love, shows up with love. Pray always and do not lose heart.

God’s steadfast love, and God’s covenant promises, endure forever.

I close with one more word of prayer from the late, great Walter Brueggemann:

“God of all our covenant-making, be alongside us in our reach for covenanting, that your whole creation may be newly knit together in loyal love, filled with wonder, love and praise.”⁷

Amen.

⁶ Fiesler Hoffman, p.8

⁷ C is for Covenant. ALPHABET OF FAITH: Prophetic Prayers for a Chaotic World by Walter Brueggemann. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2025