

Eric Dupee

November 8, 2020

Joshua 24:1-3, 14-18, 25

Committed Relationship

One of the privileges I have in my work is the opportunity to preside at weddings. It's a great honor to walk with a couple on their journey towards that moment when they stand before family, friends, and God, make solemn vows to each other, and affirm them with the words "I do." I consider that to be an incredibly special moment, a holy moment. That's why I think everyone, regardless of who they love, should have the opportunity to experience it.

In every wedding in which I preside, there comes a point when I invite everyone gathered to do something. As we watch the two people, two people who may not have been able to keep their New Year's resolutions past the 5th of January make a lifelong commitment to one another, I invite everyone gathered to think about the vows and commitments they've made in their lives.

Do you remember the promises you made to the church during your baptism or confirmation? Do you remember your membership vows when you became a church member? Do you ever think about your own marriage vows and when you responded "I do?" Veterans Day is Wednesday. The willingness to serve one's country and perhaps give one's life in that service is one profound commitment.

We tend to mark life's milestones with a verbal commitment or a promise. The theological term we use is covenant. The vows exchanged in baptism are often referred to as the Baptismal Covenant. People who marry live in the covenant of marriage. A covenant is a formal agreement that binds two parties to one another.

In our reading today, Joshua invites the people into a covenant relationship with God. By way of review, God heard the cries of the Hebrew people held captive in Egypt. Moses led them out of captivity and into the wilderness. After Moses died, Joshua led them into the land God promised them. He also led them in a gruesome military campaign in order take possession of that land.

Then, Joshua invited them into a covenant relationship with God. He asked them to make a choice. They could worship other gods if they wanted. They could worship the God's their ancestors served. They could serve the God's of those they eliminated from the land. Joshua said, "But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

The people agreed. They said, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight.” We’re told that Joshua and the people formally bound themselves to each other and to God.

If you go through the Bible, you see that the nation of Israel depended on covenant for their very survival. After flooding the earth and destroying all but Noah’s family and two of every animal, God made a covenant with Noah to never wipe out the earth’s inhabitants again. God chose to be known for faithfulness and vulnerability over power. The rainbow would be a reminder to God of that promise.

God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah. If they remain faithful, they and their descendants would retain possession of the land God gave them. At Mt. Sinai, God made a covenant with Moses and the people. If they live according to The Law, God would continue to provide for them. Covenant kept the Hebrew people through some of their most challenging circumstances.

What if covenant became the governing metaphor for our lives? What if our quality of life and even life itself depends on the covenants we make, on our commitments to one another? For much of my life, I hardly ever thought about the baptismal covenant in which I was baptized. In recent years, I’ve come to think of my baptism as the defining moment of my life.

I like to go back and remind myself of the vows that were spoken on my behalf 54 years ago. They were the same vows I made myself when I was confirmed in the church. They went something like: Do you believe in God? Do you accept Jesus as your savior? Do you promise to resist evil and oppression in whatever form they present themselves?

Wedding vows tend to be spoken with great conviction on the wedding day. As soon as the honeymoon is over and life’s routines resume, it seems to me, they quickly fade from memory. I’m divorced myself, so I know there are relationships that are best severed, but what if couples were to institute an annual reminder of their vows?

Over the last few months, we’ve heard a lot about the political polarization of our nation. Polarization leads to people becoming more segregated into likeminded groups. One group tends to demonize the other. Families are undermined.

There was a study done that showed in recent years, Thanksgiving dinners lasted for a significantly shorter time in areas of the country where Americans share meals across party

lines. There are indications that political polarization leads to stress and has detrimental effects on health. I've even heard talk about how our democracy is in jeopardy.

But I want to share something with you that gives me a ray of hope. This week marks the 400th anniversary of a series of events that had profound implications for our country. Four hundred years ago, tomorrow, the Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower finally made it across the Atlantic and spotted the tip of Cape Cod. They were not authorized to establish a settlement that far north, so they attempted to sail south.

As they made their way toward Nantucket, they ran into a fierce storm forcing them to turn and head north again. Four hundred years ago, this Wednesday, they anchored in Provincetown Harbor on Cape Cod and drew up a document known as the Mayflower Compact.

What I don't remember learning in my 7th grade American History class was that only about half the passengers on the Mayflower were pilgrims coming to this land for religious purposes. The other half were people seeking financial opportunity. Most of them were strangers to the pilgrim community.

After many weeks at sea with the pilgrims, these "Strangers" as they were called, were growing reluctant to live in a community with what they saw as a bunch of religious fanatics. When the leadership aboard the Mayflower decided to abandon heading south and to settle in what is now Massachusetts instead, these Strangers considered going off on their own.

However, they recognized the only way for the settlement to succeed financially was if everyone worked together. In fact, with winter around the corner, their very survival might depend on their ability to band together. Before they landed, they agreed it was essential that they all sign a formal and binding agreement. That document became known as the Mayflower Compact.

In part it read: "These present solemnly and mutually in the presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation..." In other words, those people that were strangers to one another, and who had little in common, drafted a covenant agreement before disembarking, because they realized they had a better chance at thriving and even surviving if they put aside their differences and banded together.

I think the same is true for us. If we want to truly thrive, we may need to choose. We may need to commit to: relationship over power, cooperation over self-interest, inclusion over exclusion.

It has been done before. It can be done again.