

Living Covenant
By Rev. Todd Farnsworth
Deuteronomy 5: 1-10



Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. 2 The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 It was not with our ancestors[a] that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. 4 The Lord spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. 5 (At

that time I stood between the Lord and you to declare to you the word of the Lord, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said:

6 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

7 “You shall have no other gods before[b] me.

8 “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 9 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 10 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

Last weekend I was away to officiate at a wedding in MA. The bride was a member of a Confirmation Class I guided 10 years ago and I was honored that she remembered me and invited me to be a part of her big day. It was great connecting with folks I hadn't seen in a long time. I counted at least 7 couples in the congregation that I had done weddings for...although I confess I didn't remember everyone's name! One youngish man rolled up his sleeve to show me a tattoo on his arm that noted the date of his wedding. To his credit, google calendars hadn't been invented when he got married 19 years ago, so it was a good way to remember his anniversary! The names were a little fuzzy, but those faces...yes. I remembered the folks who had stood before me and who had entered into a sacred covenant with one another and with God. I was pleased to see that most of those covenants had worked out.

Maybe you remember a wedding you've attended or have been a part of! The vows are really the big part of the day. Most of us know them...

I (name) take you to be my wedded wife/husband, for richer or poorer, in sickness and health, til death do us part. So help me God.

Those are the words. They are ingrained in our communal memory of covenant...unless you attend a UCC wedding and the words have been changed a little to read,

name , I give myself to you in the covenant of marriage. I promise to love and sustain you in this covenant, from this day forward, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we both shall

live.

Those are the words. They are ingrained in our communal memory...unless you attended the wedding I officiated at last weekend.

At that wedding the couple wrote their own vows. The groom unrolled a scroll that hit the floor and proclaimed his love for the bride.

The bride had her words of love too, with a few wisecracks about her ability to talk a lot, (it all came back to me as she got to page 3,) and her love for the groom and his son.

Those are the words. They are ingrained in our communal memory. But were they really the wedding covenant if they didn't use the right words? Did the couple really enter into covenant with one another and God?

We have a similar situation going on with today's lesson from Deuteronomy. It is actually the third telling of the covenant between God and the people of Israel.

In the first telling from Exodus we get laws on stone tablets. Those laws come with smoke and fire and wind and thunder and they are very dramatically presented. It might be the reason we think of them as locked down.

The second (lesser noticed) telling of the covenant appears in Exodus 34: 10-26. In this version of the covenant, we are given examples of how the covenant will be lived: **10** *Then the Lord said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is*

the work that I, the Lord, will do for you. 11 Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. 12 Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. 13 Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah poles.[a] 14 Do not worship any other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

In today's lesson from Deuteronomy, the covenant is a little gentler, I think. It takes on a more invitational and participatory tone: Moses summoned all Israel and said:

Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. 2 The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 It was not with our ancestors that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. 4 The Lord spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. 5 (At that time I stood between the Lord and you to declare to you the word of the Lord, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.) And he said:

Did you catch the difference? Even though this is the preamble, this version is far more relational in its telling. The Deuteronomist explains and describes how the covenant came to the people AND challenges the people to see this covenant as something more than a collection of laws. The author of this version wants us to read the covenant as a present, living relationship with the Holy.

Listen again: *3 It was not with our ancestors that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today.*

Talk about bringing it home! Unlike the other versions of the covenant, this one speaks directly to this moment in time. It speaks directly to the people who have been specifically chosen by God. Although much of what follows is the same, there are differences in the Commandment that adds information to the original telling. In vs 14 of the text from Deuteronomy it is noted that *the sabbath should be kept so that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou.* And in vs 15 of the Deuteronomic version there is a reminder of the relationship God has with the present listeners, that dates back to the crossing of the Red Sea! Why these additions? I believe they speak a relationship that breathes. And what do we know about breathing things? They are alive. They grow. They change. This covenant is meant to last for as long as it has legs to wander through the wilderness. It is meant to go the distance in and out of Promised Lands for generations to come all the way up to us...and beyond.

The covenant is meant to be lived.

I have noticed that many people don't share this understanding of covenant. Perhaps they haven't read the whole story of the Bible, but I believe it bears out. God makes connections with us that are not meant to be cast in stone...that are not meant to be locked in time. If the Deuteronomists had believed that the covenant was locked down as it had come off the mountain, they would not have changed a single word of it. They were verry faithful folk. They would have repeated exactly what their

predecessors who wrote Exodus proclaimed. For that matter, Jesus (who we know as God) would not have strayed from those words when he boiled the covenant down to *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*^[a] **38** *This is the first and greatest commandment. 39* *And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*^[b] **40** *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”*--Matthew 22.

That’s right...Jesus changed the words to the 10 Commandments! Like the Deuteronomists before him, Jesus understood covenant as being about more than repeating words on a tablet; covenant is about relationship. Perhaps he knew in his time that 10 were too hard to keep track of, so he simplified the language for the folks he was speaking with. The words he used didn’t change the covenant.

Covenant is about how we live together with God.

Covenant is about a Spirit that connects us to the Holy in ways that will evolve over time. The original words of a covenant give us guidance as to intent, they tell us about where the relationship started, but each generation adds their understanding through the living of that intent. Each couple I marry finds ways to make the covenant of marriage come alive for themselves. They go through hardships and experience joys that they never would have anticipated without God in their lives..and sometimes they change the words to express that difference.

The intent to share love with one another and God does not change. The expression of living in sacred union with one another and God does not change, but the nuanced intent takes on the flavor that each couple brings

to the meal. It's like adding just a pinch of cardamom to a stew. Will everyone taste it? Probably not. But for the one who put it in it makes all the difference in the world.

I tell you all these things this morning because we have some new members joining our congregation in a few weeks. The people who join will be entering into a covenant with us. They will and we will come with a holy intent to be joined in ministry together here at BCC. There will be words that we read together. Vows that we will make. And I wonder: if it's ok for the Deuteronomists and Jesus to change the words to the covenant God made with Israel, might it be ok to express the words of the covenant that began our church in 1897 in new ways? The words appeared earlier on [page 326 of the Minutes of the National Council of Congregational Churches of the United States in 1896](#), but I wonder if our spiritual forebears experienced God as a living entity who moved them beyond words on paper, or if their faith was cast in stone? I wonder if they felt the Spirit moving in their midst in ways that made them feel more alive, that challenged them to try harder, that called them to something new? Given who we are as a congregation today, I believe that their faith was not so set, as just a few years ago we added to our understanding of faith with our statement of inclusion, that everyone is welcome at this world communion table of Grace!

Like the couple that got married last weekend, like the Deuteronomists and Jesus, changing the words of the covenant was not an act of disrespect for

the past, but an embracing of our living God in the present. Those folks found new ways of expressing the loving relationships that God established and, in doing so, discovered a language of love that expressed an eternal truth.

We are together because of God.

We are together with God.

We are together for other generations to witness and proclaim for themselves.

So fret not for that young couple who changed the words. God is alive for them and I trust, like couples before them, they'll do their best to live out the covenant that they have made.

May we enter into our covenants with all of that spirit, hope, and joy as we celebrate the love that God has called us to, in Jesus' name. Amen.