

Sermon: Lent II

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 1, 2015

Year B

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Psalm 22:22-30

Romans 4:13-25

Mark 8:31-38

In 2008... Sir Jonathan Sachs... as in knighted by the Queen... and the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth of Great Britain... was invited to speak at the Lambeth Conference... a gathering of Presiding Bishops from across the Anglican Communion... which is held every ten years... it was believed to be the first time that a Jewish person had addressed these bishops...

The Rabbi was invited to speak about covenant... but in order to do that... he first talked about politics and economics... he said that politics is about the creation and distribution of power... and that economics is about the creation and distribution of wealth... and he claimed that there are two ways of getting people to do what we want them to do... one is to force them with power... and the other is to pay them... and then he *imagined*... suppose you had total power... and you decided to share it evenly with nine other people... you'd end up with only 1/10th of the power you had... and suppose... he said... you had £1,000 British pounds... and you decided to share it with nine other people... you'd end up with only £100 pounds...

But now he said... what if you decided to share not power or wealth... but love... or friendship... or even knowledge... with nine other people... would you have less than when you began... No!... he said... you'd have more... because these are things that exist only by virtue of sharing them with others... these are the things that... the more we share... the more we have... and Rabbi Sachs calls these *covenantal goods*...

Power and wealth... politics and economics... are things we can see... and as such... they exist in the arena of competition... but covenantal goods... no less real but impossible to hold in your hand... exist in the arena of cooperation...

Power and wealth generate contracts... agreements between two or more people who are pursuing their own interests... and there are commercial contracts which create the markets... and social contracts which create the state...

But a covenant is something entirely different... here... two or more people come together in a mutual bond of love and trust... to share their interests... maybe even their lives... by doing together what neither of them can do alone... and that's not the same as a contract at all... because a contract is about interests... a covenant is about identity... a contract is about transaction... and a covenant is about relationship... and that's why... he said... that contracts benefit... while covenants transform...

Pastor Paul Nuechterlein at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Portage wrote: when we live in relationship... when we share just about everything... from ordinary activities down to our innermost thoughts and feelings... we learn about our partners... and about ourselves... we learn what it is to be human... and it's a never ending process filled with trial and error... and just when we think we've got them figured out... we're surprised again... so love and forgiveness is needed...

It's been twenty-four years since Abram first heard God's promise... he is now ninety-nine... and the LORD appeared to him and said: I am God Almighty... and I will make my covenant between me and you... and will make you exceedingly numerous... you shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations... no longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham... as for your wife Sarai... Sarah shall be her name... I will bless her... I will give you a son by her... and she shall give rise to nations... kings of peoples shall come from her...

In the Hebrew... God refers to God's self as *El Shaddai*... God Almighty... the One of the Mountain... it's the first time in Torah that God refers to God's self in this way... and together... not just Abram and Sarai... but together... these three covenant partners get new names... new identities... to do new work...

Last week... in the rainbow covenant... we saw how God gave up unlimited power... with nothing required of Noah... but in today's missing vv. 8 - 14... God requires something of Abraham and his sons... their male slaves... and all male descendants... that they be circumcised... Torah offers no rationale for this commandment... but God presents it as non-negotiable... and if it's not obeyed... at least at this point in time... the covenant is broken and that one shall be removed from his people...

When these vv. are left out of the lectionary... we don't get to imagine how Abraham responded to this... we remember in ch. 15... that Abram's rock-solid trust in God... was reckoned to him as righteousness... nothing more was asked for... but now there's some bodily involvement... that's required to remain in relationship with this God... in order to be set apart... somehow...

And in today's Gospel... Jesus requires something more of us... something which will change us... something which may be painful... but which continues to set us apart...

In the death and resurrection of Jesus... we have been transformed... and like lovers in a relationship... we continue to learn more about ourselves and each other... but when we choose the small-g gods of power: wealth... contract... competition... and transaction... things which are zero-sum games... which means that your gains are my losses... when we choose these over what the large-G God offers: covenant... cooperation... relationship... and transformation... we find ourselves at Jesus' words in today's Gospel...

"For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."

The God who wants us to choose life... does not want us to die...the God who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly... does not want us to perish... but wants us to turn back to God... when Jesus says we'll lose our life if we save it... he

doesn't mean that we'll die... he means that we *will choose to keep from ourselves... all that God wants for us...* that if we hold on so tightly to what we think or believe or how we act... and insist that we're right... that there'll be no room for anything more... certainly no room for the Spirit to come in...

That's why Jesus told Peter to get behind him... Peter was in a relationship with Jesus... with its never ending process of trial and error... and four vv. ago... Peter had just correctly identified Jesus as the Messiah... but here... he gets caught up in thinking... not about cooperation and transformation... but about contract and transaction...

W. Hulitt Gloer... faculty member at Baylor University... imagined Peter's inner dialogue: suffering... rejection... and death are not on the agenda... prestige... power... and dominion are... it's David's throne we're after... ruling the nations with power and might... we signed on for a crown... not a cross...

Another way of understanding what Jesus said might be... "If any want to become my followers, let them seek covenant and not contract... let them seek relationship and not transaction... let them seek transformation and not benefit... because those who hold onto their old identities... to their old names... those who remain rigid in what they knew... who are not open to changing their perspectives... will lose the new identities and new lives that God offers through covenant...

But those who are *willing* to lose who they were... who they thought they were... who are willing to let go of what their lives mean... so they can become more... to them... the truth of who God is... will continually be unfolded and revealed in relationship... and they will be saved from their own limitations... and will take on the mind of Christ...

I've referred a few times to the mind of Christ... and it's one of those elusive things... it's like describing a mango to someone who's never tasted one... so not even a thorough

description can substitute for the experience itself... but Richard Rohr has described in several ways: it's the ability to stand back and calmly observe our inner dramas... without rushing to judgment... he writes... on one level... soul, consciousness, and the Holy Spirit can all be thought of as one and the same... each of these point to something that is larger than the self... shared with God... and even eternal... that's what Jesus means when he speaks of "giving" us the Spirit or sharing his consciousness with us...

One whose soul is awakened actually has *the mind of Christ*... that does not mean the person is psychologically or morally perfect... but from then on... such a transformed person sees things in a much more expanded and compassionate way... Ephesians calls it *a spiritual revolution of the mind*... the mind of Christ gives us a unified way of *seeing* in every moment... where both the obvious and the still-mysterious can exist side by side... Jesus calls this implanted Spirit... the Advocate... who is *with you and in you*... who makes you live with the same life that he lives... and unites you not just in thought... but in direct experience... with everything else... it is atonement... being at-one-ment... with all of creation...

As we continue our Lenten journeys... let's remember the ways that God has limited God's own power... the way God gives us new identities... the covenants made out of love... intended to deepen relationship... and let's try to let go of our certainties... the ways we tell ourselves things ARE... so our minds... and hearts... and eyes have room to receive and see the wonder of God's mystery alongside the obvious... and our hands are free to do God's work...

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