

Pastor Kevin Garman

Scripture: Hebrews 8:8-13

Theme: Covenant & Community

September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Last week, we talked about hope and how scripture beckons us to be a hopeful people as we build the kingdom of God together. This week we talk about covenants and how covenants hold our community accountable and bring us together relationally. We will continue with the Book of Hebrews as this is a book largely about discovering Christianity's identity in a new a changing world with a new community and new faces. This is the last week of my first 10 sermons in this church, and we will be moving to something new as we begin to kick off our church year this fall. I briefly wanted to share with you what the next sermon series will be, and thankfully, for all of us, it will not be ten weeks like our previous series.

Next week, we will begin a six-part series on what it means to be the church. We are going to use the book, *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations* by Bishop Robert Schnase, who was the bishop of the Missouri Conference and currently serves as Bishop of the Rio Texas Conference. In this book, Bishop Schnase offers us five practices that show the vitality of congregations throughout the church. We will talk about Radical Hospitality, Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Risk-taking mission and service, and Extravagant Generosity. We will conclude by speaking about how we do this in a Covid 19 era and how excellence and fruitfulness are a part of who we are as United Methodists. I'm going to restart my weekly reflections on Facebook Live again with a preview of what is coming for Sunday and offer a brief reflection through a song, poem, scripture, or reflection of what this means to me. I will post them on Thursdays at 3:00 p.m. if you can want to tune in.

This is the second week we have talked about the Book of Hebrews, and as I mentioned in the newsletter this week, I would like to hold a Bible study on the Book of Hebrews via zoom because it is a great book of the Bible that reflects on what it means to be a Christian in a world that is rapidly changing around them and a community that is welcoming in new members to this new religious community called Christianity. The author of Hebrews is widely debated. Traditionally, as most of the New Testament without a specific name or the gospels, we have considered Paul the author, but it doesn't add up chronologically with some of the items

discussed in Hebrews and when they would have happened. Some scholars even wonder if the author was Priscilla, a contemporary of Paul who accompanied Paul in his ministry. She was a strong faith leader who was nurturing and committed to her work for the Lord as she helped other faith leaders become better leaders in Acts and helped start the church in Corinth.

Regardless of who the author of Hebrews is, the Book of Hebrews clearly offers us a direction for how we should understand our faith. The conclusion the author comes to is that we as Christians should use Jesus, his authority as the son of God, and his ministry as examples of how to live out our faith and be the church in the world. Previous to the section we read in chapter 8, the author talks about our faith leaders throughout our history in the Old Testament. In fact, the Old Testament is quoted over 80 times throughout the Book of Hebrews. It also speaks about Jesus being our high priest who leads us in our ministry and work. Last week, we spoke briefly about this, but it is significant because Jesus is the one who connects us to God just as the high priests did for the Israelites.

The passage we read today is quoting the Book of Jeremiah. I confess, I do not know as much as I would like about the Book of Jeremiah, but it is never in question that Jeremiah was a passionate, spirit-led prophet of his day. In Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is the verse Hebrews 8 quotes, Jeremiah speaks to the people about redemption. This is a major theme throughout his prophetic ministry as he calls on the people of Israel to realize the destructive path they are heading down. He calls on Israel to repent and rebuild their relationships with each other and the world they live in before it is too late. Jeremiah, just like the author of Hebrews, asks the questions, "who are we? & how are we transforming into a new identity as Christians?" This is where he talks about the new covenant with Israel, just as Hebrews speaks about our new covenant with Christ.

Covenants are important throughout the Bible. God makes covenants with faith leaders that will lead people to new beginnings, like Moses, David, and Abraham. God makes covenants with folks after the destruction of communities, like with Noah, Ezra, Nehemiah. We see other faith leaders like Ruth, Esther, and the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos use covenants as a central theme to their messages on redemption, healing, and grace. Covenants are a part of our identity because covenants help hold our communities accountable to one another.

One of the covenants that was so important to me in my life was my covenant of brotherhood with my fraternity brothers of Theta Chi Epsilon. We were a strange group and not your typical fraternity. We were mainly a group of nerdy

guys who were avid video game players, theater nerds, dungeon and dragons enthusiasts, and most of us fairly good students, which are never typical attributes you hear about in college fraternities. We also had several colorful nicknames that I won't repeat here because we had several gay, bisexual, and transgender brothers. We were not your typical fraternity in southwest, Virginia.

We were brothers of all different backgrounds and identities. Some of us were black, white, brown; Some of us were born in the south and others were from other countries like Cameroon, the United Kingdom, Brazil; Some of us were Republicans, Democrats, Socialists, Libertarians; Some former football players and others student leaders like Resident Advisors and leaders of social issues groups on campus, but there was one thing we all had in common; We were all brothers of Theta Chi Epsilon.

We had three official colors, a motto, and a crest that I would like to share a little bit with you. Our colors were Green, Black, and White. Green represented our brotherhood which bound us together in our fraternal bonds and was our most common color. Black represented our diversity and as we would tell prospective members, black is important to us because black is all colors combined, which represented our emphasis on being different from other fraternities and being proud of those differences and our diversity. White was the color that represented purity. Not purity in the sense that we were better than everyone else or that we were the best, blameless individuals. But purity, in the sense, that we wanted to strive for something more and that our brotherhood never ended when we graduated but continued on throughout our lives as our relationships with one another grew.

Our motto was, *Adrem Publican Adeunt*, which translated from Latin meant, "Enter Into Public Service." We did our best to be leaders in the community and to be active in our community as we tried to help those in need and bring people together. On our crest, we had a mantle that was cracked in middle, which was the uneven mantle. The uneven mantle represented our brokenness and our imperfections, but throughout the rest of our crest, we were reminded that our brothers were there to pick us back up and hold us accountable as we lived our motto in the world.

In many ways, this is how I understand covenants and our Christian community. A symbol that binds us together and holds each other accountable. A family who regardless of our faults still comes together to break bread, share our stories, help and engage in our communities, and tries to build a better place

through our principles and values of love, grace, compassion, justice, and peace. We are undoubtedly being challenged in the era of Covid-19 to live into these themes and be connected with one another as we used to be, but I challenge us to look at our covenants with Christ to see that this has always been our calling. We have always faced bleak, difficult times whether it be the persecution of the early church, the birthing our nation, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, or the current crises we all face here in our world today. We were called, we are called, and we will continue to be called disciples of Jesus Christ who go into the world to spread the good news that all are welcome at the table of grace, that all are loved and wonderfully created in the image of God, and that all people regardless of our differences or commonalities deserve an equitable chance at being our fullest selves in our communities and our lives.

In conclusion, I hope we are listening to the prophets of today who call on our repentance to return or to rebuild our principles and values. I hope we are spreading the love of the Gospel in a world that is so disconnected because of social, economic, and political views. My hope is that we realize your suffering is my suffering and my suffering is your suffering. I hope in this because if we cannot reestablish our covenant that God sent his son because he loved us so much to teach and live that love in the world, then we may be approaching darker days that none of us, regardless of who we are or claim to be, want to see.

I end today's sermon with the words of Old Crow Medicine Show from the song, *We're All in This Thing Together*, this is the chorus of that song. "We're all this thing together. Walking the line between faith and fear. This life don't last forever. When you cry I taste the salt in your tears." Our God knows our pain, feels our pain, and cries knowing our suffering is unbearable at times. We hear each other's pain, we feel each other's pain, and may we give one another grace as we lament in that pain together. Amen.