

# WE HAVE A COVENANT TO KEEP

Sermon Preached

By the Rev. Mark S. Delcuze

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St. Peter's Church, Glenside PA

My sister and brothers this afternoon, we stand at the threshold of a call to a covenant which is both profoundly interior and exterior. About a decade ago, Esther de Waal wrote a small book entitled *To Pause at the Threshold*. In it she reflects on her time living on the Welsh Borders as well as the universal human experience of pausing at times of transition. She offers the ancient wisdom "*a threshold is a sacred thing*".

This day, we gather at just such a sacred threshold. We do the things that faithful people do. We pause, we sing, we pray and we read scripture; before crossing the threshold together in God. It is in this sacred pause that we remember the covenant we have made with God and with each other.

Covenant is a crucial word for Episcopalians. It is used more than 80 times in the Book of Common Prayer from Biblical Canticles to the Eucharistic Prayer. It represents the solemn relationship between God and God's people, but it also recalls "a solemn agreement between the members of a church to act together in harmony with the precepts of the gospel."

My friends in Christ, we have a covenant to keep.

Our first reading, from the Prophet Jeremiah directs our attention to the interior call ... though in this case, not necessarily our own personal call, for who would want to be Jeremiah? If you read very far along in his writings you will discover he was a man of woe: an outcast, he was called a traitor.

Yet our call is as personal and as transformative as Jeremiah's. God's words to the prophet are words which ring true for each of us:

'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you ...'

Tonight is a night for every order of ministry in this place to consider our covenant call to be with God. Laity, Bishops, Priests and even Deacon Donna Barr, Emily's mom: once again we find ourselves at the threshold, that sacred spot.

God's call to each one of us is as personal and profound as was Jeremiah's. God knew each of us in the womb, God consecrated each of us, God appoints us ...well for what?

In their amazing book: *Adventures in Missing the Point*, Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo begin by retelling a story they heard from a friend

“I’m in the Home Depot. A series of consumer canyons tower menacingly overhead. All I need is a thingamajig. Where is it and who cares? My eyes quickly scan the horizon of stuff looking for a little just-in-time customer service.

I want to scream: Take your eyes off those boxes! Get down off that stupid ladder! Quit visiting with your co-workers! Don’t pick up that phone! Pay attention to me!

But it’s pointless. And I finally get it: I’m an interruption. An irritation. They’d prefer I wasn’t in their building.

They’ve forgotten why they went into business. IT wasn’t to count boxes. Or Visit with each other. Or ignore the customer. They went into business to pay attention to the customer.

Employees like these have missed the point.”

In order for us not to miss the point, we recall that our story is bound up in the covenantal realities of our Baptism:

- Will you continue in the Apostles Teaching and Fellowship, the Breaking of Bread and the Prayers?
- Will you preserve in resisting evil and whenever you fall into sin repent and return to the Lord?

These are the interior aspects of our mission: to stay close to the word and teaching of God to us and to return when we stray.

My sisters and brothers ... we have a covenant to keep

Turning to the Epistle, I feel a certain kinship with St. Paul tonight. Writing after a quarter century of ministry in the Eastern Mediterranean, Paul’s Letter to the Romans is written to a community which he knows only second hand. And yet, even with secondary knowledge, Paul knows what needs to be said to this community:

‘Do not be conformed to this world  
Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think  
Let love be genuine  
Bless those who persecute you  
Live peaceably with all’

This great collection of desiderata, of desired things, makes it clear that our covenant requires action ... love in action, love in relationship. Sometimes, we don't know how to make this work.

A woodsman from West Virginia comes down out of the hills to purchase a new axe. "You don't need a new axe", the salesman says, "What you need is a brand new chain saw. Why with this little baby you'll be chopping twice the wood in half the time". Skeptical, the woodsman buys the chain saw and heads back into the hills. Three months later, the woodsman reappears; gaunt and disheveled he hasn't slept in weeks. "This thing doesn't work. I can't cut enough wood to keep my cabin warm, no less to have any to sell". The salesman takes the tool, "Let's see". He flips the switch, pull the starter cord and the machine races to life. "What's that noise?" the woodsman screams.

Love in action, the exterior call is bound up in the covenantal realities of our Baptism:

- Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?

This is the great center of who we are: God had formed us and known us ... God who has consecrated and appointed us ... God expects us to live as if this makes a difference.

My brothers and sisters ... we have a covenant to keep

Perhaps this covenant is best considered through the joys of fresh translation. Eugene Peterson is one of my heroes. As a young priest, his books spoke to me. Writing as an active pastor to other active believers ... I found his instruction to reading scripture, a disciplined life of prayer and spiritual direction to be credible and engaging.

Then I discovered he was translating the Bible, singlehandedly. I'm not sure how far you got with ancient languages (except you Emily, I know you taught Latin) but mastery of Koine Greek, Aramaic, and Biblical Hebrew is a tall order. What I love about Peterson's translation, which he calls *The Message* is its vitality.

Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

On this night friends, in this place, we cross a threshold. At such a sacred moment, a charge is in order.

Emily Barr Richards, tonight you become the Rector of St. Peter's Church. Learn about the Eagles and the Phillies. Tonight you will be fully empowered and authorized to exercise this vital ministry. Tonight you will be asked to accept privileges and responsibilities not only in this parish, but in this diocese and the wider church. Remember the unique way in which God has formed and known, consecrated and appointed you. Remember also to "love from the center of who you are" Every Member of this parish, this diocese this city and the world.

To this gathered community tonight, you, too, are joined into a mutual ministry with Emily. Learn the ways of Kentucky Wildcat Basketball. You have already been fully empowered by your baptism to represent Christ and the Church to the world. Now you bind your ministry with hers: loving deeply, praying in hard times, being inventive in hospitality. You too must remember to "love from the center of who you are".

Beloved in Christ ... we have a covenant to keep.