

Broken Covenant – Renewed Vision

A sermon by Robert Yutzy at Salem-Zion Mennonite Church, Freeman, South Dakota on October 25, 2015

Here at Salem-Zion we are in a sermon series on covenant both because we are considering what it means to be churches linked together through a covenant of practices in our conference, which is Central Plains Mennonite Conference, through the leadership of David Boshart and Tim Detweiler, and we are also living into a change in our constitution where we are covenant members here at North Church.

Do you ever wonder when you get out of bed on Sunday morning why anyone would want to be part of a church? Do you ever ask yourself, why am I going to church today?

Well..., you are all here,... in church..., so I assume you have some interest in being a part of whatever it is that is supposed to happen here this morning at Salem-Zion.

I don't normally encourage people to church-shop, but this morning, I am inviting you to do a little bit of church shopping with me.

We are only going to look at two churches. Church A. And Church B. (repeat) Church A. And Church B.

Let's go take a look at Church A first.

Church A is built on four core values

The values that I will be sharing this morning come from the work of David Boshart and are available on the central plains website under the covenant resources tab.

Value # 1 The individuals choose and create community as they deem necessary

Oh, I kind of like that. This means I get to decide what the church will be like. That would help me get out of bed on Sunday morning.

Value #2 Fosters a union of interests (is this church helping me grow, meeting my needs?)

Oh I like that even better, this is a church where I can ask them to make changes that I want to see and keep the things I like just the way they always have been.

Value #3 Church A locates religious authority and accountability in the individual's personal relationship with God.

Wow, this means that what I sense God telling me matters and I can have the authority to act on it and not worry what others are going to think of me.

Value #4 The members of Church A recognize their relationships are conditional and If the community ceases to meet my needs, the relationship is legitimately nullified

Okay, so no guilt trips here, if the church community ceases to meet my needs, my membership is legitimately nullified. I can walk out the door without one ounce of guilt.

That all sounds pretty good to me. I think I would like Church A.

Now let's take some time to consider someone who attends Church A, and it would be good to ask someone who was born in this church.

So first off we find this elderly couple whose names are Abraham and Sarah. Yes, the people in our Scripture text this morning. As I hear them tell their story and their experience in Church A, we get a much better idea of how Church A functions.

In the text from Genesis we find a story about church relationships that don't seem to be very wholesome and nothing close to harmonious.

Here is a little background,

- God told Abraham to leave his home country and set out for a new home that God would somehow show him how to get there.
- God promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation, that will possess a fertile land and kings will come from his descendants.

- But Sarah, Abraham’s wife was childless, and they were becoming an old couple, time was not on their side.
- So Sarah said to Abraham in Genesis 16:1-2, *“The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.”*

So if we look at Core Value #1,

Church A members get to choose and create community as they deem necessary. So Sarah is just exercising her right as a member, her actions are rooted in that value.

Sure, God did promise Abraham and Sarah offspring but God must have changed his mind cause nothing is happening and someone needs to get this party started or there will never be any kind of a nation following their time on the earth.

And Sarah belongs to a church that cares about her interests and fosters whatever she decides will help her grow or what will meet her needs.

See Core value #2 where she is encouraged to ask, “is this church helping me grow, meeting my needs?”

So how did this work out?

For Sarah it didn’t take long for her to decide that this arrangement of having Hagar become a surrogate for her wasn’t working out so well.

We read in Genesis 16, *4Abraham slept with Hagar, and she conceived.*

When Sarah knew Hagar was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

5Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.”

Now Abraham must have been thinking about core value #3 that authority and accountability are located in the individual’s personal relationship with God. So Sarah gives her interpretation of how God is working this all out and Abraham, if you would

see me as God does, you would give me permission to handle this uncomfortable situation.

So Abraham says,

*“Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.”
Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.*

All of Sarah’s choices and also Abraham’s for that matter are supported by Church A’s core value#4 that the relationships are conditional. If the community ceases to meet my needs, the relationship is legitimately nullified.

Sarah may have been within her rights as a member of Church A to declare her relationship with Hagar as null and void and chase her from her home, but this community that Sarah chose and continues to shape is turning into a disaster.

In a few short verses, Church A has gone from wonderful freedom, to regretful decisions, abusive behavior and resulted in Hagar fleeing for her safety.

This is not the wholesome and harmonious kind of fellowship that I am looking for. It seems to just be getting more broken verse by verse and it keeps getting worse.

For a verse or two it does get better and seems really wonderful, Sarah miraculously becomes pregnant at the age of 90. At last, God is fulfilling his promise to give Abraham and Sarah children.

But Sarah’s attention to the joy of being an expectant mother is pushed aside by her contempt for Hagar.

How is it that those core values could lead to fostering such contempt for one another in this Church. Even though those values sound good, maybe I don’t want get up on Sunday for that church experience.

I’m ready to take a look at church B. Would you like to take a look at Church B?

Church B also has four key values that it ascribes too. While they are similar to Church A's, they are really very different.

Core Value #1 In Church B the community is the choice and gift of God.

It is God that initiates, it is God that invites. Perhaps God left Sarah barren so long so that there would not be any question that it was indeed God's initiative to bless Abraham and Sarah with a child. And if you remember, their response to the news that they, the old Abraham and Sarah, 100 and 90 were going to have a child? They laughed. And God said his name was to be Isaac, which means laughter or he laughs.

Core Value #2 Church B fosters a union of persons (we give of our very selves to each other)

What would this have looked like if Sarah, even in her going ahead of God, could have looked at these relationships as covenants?

A covenant fosters a union of persons, (we give of our very selves to each other), interests are considered but not just your own.

In Philippians 2:3-4 Paul encourages the church at Philippi to, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”

Sarah wasn't taking any responsibility for her choices and neither was Abraham who so willingly slept with Hagar and got her pregnant. Sarah couldn't stand Hagar and when she made it clear to Abraham that it Hagar was just a reminder of her own infertility and she blamed it on Abraham, and then Abraham gave Sarah permission to mistreat her.

What might the outcome have been different if Sarah could have faced the pain in her own life rather than blaming Abraham and Hagar? What if Sarah could have considered Hagar's interests? If she was going to flee, she would be giving up the safety of the oversight and provisions of Abraham. She would be a refugee.

What if their whole group could have helped hold Sarah's pain and together seek God for direction? To ask together, what is God saying to us? To wrestle together with doubts of whether God had forgotten God's promise?

Church B tries to do just that.

Core Value #3 Church B Locates authority and accountability in the church's mutual discernment.

Again back in Genesis 16: we read of Sarah's interpretation of God's absence.

2 she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children." Rather than bringing Abraham into some sense of discernment about what this meant, Sarah went on ahead with a solution. Since God has done this, we must do this. You sleep with Hagar and get her pregnant so I can have a family.

In a covenant relationship authority and accountability are located in the mutual discernment of all those involved. When it comes to congregational discernment, as Anabaptists we are **rooted in the belief that discernment lies in the whole of the church not just one part of it or in one person.**

Sarah didn't seem to want to get any other opinion about what she ought to do about being infertile at 75 years old.

Core Value #4 In Church B, relationships are unconditional: Grounded in the self-giving, steadfast love of God.

Sarah's relationship with Hagar was far from unconditional love, in the passage today, Sarah doesn't even call Hagar by her name. She hardly saw Hagar as a person.

Sarah says to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." Still going to Church A isn't she.

If we return to Philippians 2 and read on:

5 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

⁶ *Who, being in very nature^[a] God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;*

⁷ *rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature^[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

If we were to live our lives in a way that we empty ourselves, yield ourselves to one another, Church B becomes quite a contrast to Church A.

If I were to give names to these two churches, I would call Church A the Church of Transaction (rooted in contracts).

From economics, we know that a transaction only takes place when both parties believe that they are getting more than they are giving. If the buyer believes the price is too high, the buyer will most likely keep looking. If the seller believes the price is too low, the seller isn't going to sign.

If I would give Church B a name, it would be called the Church of Transformation (rooted in covenants) where we gather together because God has created the church to care for one another as persons, where accountability and authority is located in the gathered community, and we live into the future God is calling us to with mutual discernment.

Now that is a tall order and something we need to work at every day and the very reason why covenant membership can mean something more than just becoming a member and forgetting why I am giving myself to this congregation and reflecting on that on a yearly basis.

Covenants define what we vow and promise to do for the sake of a relationship.

Covenant is understood in Tim D's study, *Being God's Faithful Community*, *covenant is meant to "help us maintain relationships with God and each other.*

We give ourselves into Gods transforming work in our lives so we can know fullness of life in God's reign even when we differ."

How might this story of Abraham and Sarah read if they had lived this kind of covenant out with Hagar and Ishmael?

It is easy to say that I would have done it differently, but I'm not sure that is even evidenced in my own life. And we all have experienced broken covenants where the person we thought we could count on, acted in a way we could never have predicted.

Covenants are not something that can be legislated, they aren't motivated out of fear for control or to limit power, they are rooted in love.

Oh how we are struggling to find the Church of the Transformation, Church B. As a community we struggle to empty ourselves for the benefit of others, as a denomination, we are hardly holding it together, and as a nation we are struggling to know what it means to live in an open and free society where we live in covenant with one another in mutual respect, loving our neighbors where we don't need to fear being shot at on the freeway or in the classroom.

We need Church B, a church created by God's initiative and unconditional love.

One of the great hopes in this passage is that God is not limited by being confined to church B, God comes to us in church A.

After Hagar is sent away and finds herself a refugee, crossing the desert, running out of water she experiences the ultimate abandonment, to be left to die alone. In her desperation she cannot bear to watch Ishmael succumb to dehydration and places him under the shade of a bush and waits for death to come. The vision for her life had been reduced to impending death, she could see no other future.

And God comes to her; God hears Ismael's crying out. Ishmael means, God hears. And God opens Hagar's eyes so she can see the water nearby and assures her that there is a renewed vision, not only will Ismael live through today, God will make him into a great nation also. For God has seen Hagar, heard Ismael, and comes to them in their suffering.

And the power, the true power of Church B, this Church of the Transformation is that if we are committed to each other in covenant relationship... we can offer that same message God spoke to Hagar, our community and our churches can speak those same words to those who have also been faced with circumstances they never expected and didn't deserve.

In one of the churches we pastored, years before we were there, a young man walked to the front of the congregation on a Sunday morning service, carrying his newborn son who had Down Syndrome. And I don't know if I have the words exactly right, but he said something like this. "I don't know what is ahead for us in the coming years as a family, but I do know that God is walking with us and you are too.

This is the power that covenant membership can have, for us to reflect on who has initiated this community? To know that relationships go above interests? To discern together as a community, not as a faction, or an individual. And to love unconditionally.

The world desperately needs this covenant community. A community that can say,

God sees you, and we see you."

God is with you, and we are with you.

And even if you feel like God isn't hearing you, we hear you.

"Do Not Be Afraid."

So...

Where are you going to church next Sunday? Church A, or Church B

I was not able to work the following in to this sermon but it is a great comment on why we need a covenant community more than ever:

As a society we are struggling to know what it means to be in covenant with our neighbors when we have students who open fires on classmates and instructors, where road rage turns into shots being fired into a car and killing a four year old girl. We have covenanted together to have an open society, and when that covenant is broken we don't have a mechanism to deal with it. When society gets so broken that you cannot count on a bond of being neighbors, the only option is to put up fences, put up walls, electrify them, post armed guards, allow the government to monitor our conversations. What do we do when what we expect is not what we get? Even when it is our just due?

Walter Brueggemann, "It is abundantly and unmistakably clear that we are in a deep dislocation in our society that touches every aspect of our lives."

On a group level we see this as wartorn countries, systematic killing of enemies often for religious reasons. Hundreds of thousands displaced by these wars. And on an individual level, George Bell, dies alone in New York City and no one even notices.

http://gothamist.com/2015/10/18/dying_alone.php

We are a broken world. We may not be experiencing this level of brokenness but we do know that the world is changing and changing rapidly. As church consultant Peter Steinke writes, "Old certainties are disappearing; old institutions are less dependable, old assumptions are questionable, and old neighborhoods are less cohesive. p. 19

Brueggemann, "bewilderment about mission, mean spirited dispute, and anxieties about members and growth."

God is our rock, our hope in the brokenness, the one who can awaken a vision for us that we have ability to see or believe and perhaps we have even lost the desire to believe God is even paying attention.

“Regardless of the nature of change, the church affirms that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God who has been active in history and who will be active in the future. The challenge for us as a church is whether we can be true to our purpose and attuned to its context.

“Isaac” means laughter

N.T. Wright states, But new creation has already begun. the sun has begun to rise. Christians are called to leave behind in the tomb of Jesus, all that belongs to the brokenness and incompleteness of the present world. it is time in the power of the Spirit to take up our proper role, our fully human role, as agents, heralds, and stewards of the new day that is dawning.”

The light will shine so much brighter if we can reach for one another, to assure each other that we will never walk alone, we will not die alone and unnoticed, and we will hold each other even in our doubt.

We may have to allow for the possibility that these dislocations could be part of God’s new creation. It may be God working through the unknown that contributes to the destabilization of the world. God is no stranger to Eden’s deportation, Babel’s cowering, the exodus, the exile, and the crucifixion. God can be surprising, mysterious, taking history into unexpected turns.