

January 1, 2006 New Covenant, New Year, Luke 22:17-30

A Sermon by Pastor Brad Smith

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The Sermon in a Sentence: The new covenant gives us the possibility and the freedom to give ourselves in love.

Why I am Preaching it: So that the congregation will understand the Christian life as self-giving love.

I am so glad that this year it worked out for us to take communion together on January 1. This is a terrific passage for starting out the New Year. In this one short incident we see self-giving love as the heart of the Gospel, or the new covenant, as Jesus calls it here. We also see a beautiful example of Jesus living out the new covenant, modeling the wonderful freedom it brings to put others' interests ahead of our own. That is what we will look at this morning: self-giving love as the heart of the Gospel or new covenant, and what that love looks like in practical terms in our daily lives.

By using the phrase “new covenant,” Jesus tells us that he is building on something that has gone before. There was an old covenant. So before we get to the Gospel or the good news of the new covenant and how to live by it, we will need to spend a few minutes looking back in Jewish history.

Each year during the Passover Feast, Jews remembered how God had miraculously rescued their ancestors from death and slavery in the land of Egypt, a little over twelve hundred years before the time of Jesus. On that first Passover evening, the Jews sacrificed lambs, ate them at a meal together, and then spread the blood of the lambs on their doorposts. That blood represented the life of the lamb that had been sacrificed. The blood served as a sign of God's protection against the angel of death that was about to pass through Egypt.

Immediately after the Passover, God's servant Moses led the people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, where he gave them the Ten Commandments and made a covenant with them. Sometimes “covenant” is translated, “testament.” The Ten Commandments formed the basis of God's relationship with his people during the time of the old covenant, which included most of what we commonly call the Old Testament times.

So what exactly is a covenant? We don't use the word very often these days. But we do have one example from everyday life that will help us to understand covenant. Think about the covenant of marriage.

Here is what happens in a healthy marriage: A man and a woman take time to get to know one another. Each of them is trying to discern whether they can love and trust the other. Then at some point they make a covenant together. Traditionally they exchange vows that express the intention to forsake all others, and to love and honor one another for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until they are parted by death.

When the couple repeats their vows they are not thinking of how little they can commit to the other, but how much they can commit. The focus is not on the self and one's rights, but on the beloved. No bride or groom asks the minister to define "poorer" to see at what point they can bail out of the marriage, or asks if the vow can be interpreted to allow casual dating of other people. No. The marriage vow means that the bride and groom are giving their whole selves to the other in all circumstances and without reservation. A fundamental characteristic of a covenant is putting the interests of the other ahead of one's own interests.

The Ten Commandments are the vows of the old covenant between God and his people. Let's look briefly at two of the commandments: one regarding our relationship towards God, and the other regarding our relationship with one another. Think of the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy by not working on that day. The idea was for God's people to give themselves wholly to him and to enjoy him on the Sabbath. It was to be a day of worship and rejoicing in their relationship with God. The focus was on him.

Or take the commandment not to steal. The idea was to be deeply concerned for the financial well being of one's neighbor. The focus was on the neighbor and his or her need for security.

Looking after the other's interests characterized the covenant between God and Israel. God lavished his love on his people, and they in turn lavished their love on him and on one another. That was the intention of the old covenant, just as it is the intention of marriage.

Sometimes, sadly, a couple remains legally married, but the sense of covenant disappears. They do not want a divorce, but little by little the sense

of being in covenant grows cold. Instead of thinking how fully they can serve one another, the focus becomes self interest. You might say that they become infected with the “self” virus. They define and protect their rights. That is what happened in the case of Israel and God.

God, of course, never abandons the covenant from his side. But the people of God can grow cold towards him. We might say that in the years after the first Passover, the marriage of God and his people grew stale. Self interest replaced God centeredness. Instead of the Sabbath as a day of expressing joyful love for God, it became the subject of hundreds of regulations. The regulations told the people exactly how much work they could get away with without technically breaking the Sabbath commandment.

The same thing happened with the other commandments. Taking again the commandment about stealing, the Old Testament prophets condemned the religious leaders for enriching themselves by oppressing the poor. They justified their behavior by insisting that technically they were not stealing.

The people of God desperately needed to renew their vows with their Lord. About six hundred years before the time of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah looked forward to the time of a new covenant. It would not be based on outward regulations, but on hearts given over in love to God. Here is what he said: “ ‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people...they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest’ ” (Jeremiah 31:33-34). The basis of the relationship would be self-giving love and service.

Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah. He used the Passover, the symbol of the old covenant, to teach about his new covenant. Jesus knew how deeply sin or self-centeredness runs in the human race. He knew it would take more than good intentions for us to be able to live without self at the center. It would take his death as the penalty for our sin.

Now Jesus was going to become the sacrificial Passover lamb that protected against sin, self, and death. His disciples would take his body and even his blood into themselves, as we just did this morning, as a sign of the new covenant between God and his people. He was making possible the new covenant by sacrificing himself. He was also giving his disciples a model of how to live the new covenant. He was putting their interests ahead of his

own, just as they were to do for each other. He was doing the exact opposite of everything that this sin-sick world teaches us to do.

And what happened in this beautiful moment when Jesus prepared to sacrifice himself in service to his followers? Read verse 24: "... a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest." Probably Jesus didn't know whether to laugh or cry at that point.

But he did neither. Instead, he graciously used the disciples' self-centeredness as a teaching moment on what life under the new covenant looks like. He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:25-27).

Do you see the insight that Jesus has into human nature here? I suppose we all have tried to pressure people into doing things our way, all the while insisting that we are only doing it all for their good, not for ourselves. That is what it means to lord it over others while we call ourselves their benefactors. It is how the world works. Even Christian families and congregations are infected with this self-virus. Jesus offers the antidote to the virus of self: the antidote is self-forgetfulness that leads to service.

And here's the surprise: Forgetting ourselves in service to others actually improves our own lives as well. We are happier, and we are more fun to be around. It can be so exhausting always to battle for our rights, pushing and pressuring to see that things at work, at home, or at church get done our way. What a relief to let go of the terrible burden of self!

I think it would be good to add a word of warning here. There is such a thing as unhealthy service. It includes doing things for people, perhaps even for our own children, that they can do for themselves. Signs of unhealthy service include physical and mental exhaustion, a burdened feeling, or a sense of guilt that we cannot meet everybody's needs.

Complaints from our families that we are never around or that we are irritable and distracted can also be signs of unhealthy service.

We are generally the last to realize it when we are involved in unhealthy service. Listen to the kind warnings of friends and family. If our service is unhealthy, then we need to serve less. But most of us, as participants in the new covenant, will want to grow in self-forgetfulness and increase in service to others. How can we get started? As we begin the new year, here are a few questions that we might begin asking ourselves day by day:

What would bring relief or even joy to my family member, my co-worker, my neighbor, my fellow church member? Can I willingly do that thing? What demands and rights do I choose to let go of out of love for God, for my family, for my neighbors, and for my church?

The point is not to focus on how any other person, even a family member, should better be serving. The point is not to get my selfish husband, wife, son, daughter, or coworker to give up his or her rights. These are questions that we each ask of ourselves alone.

As we develop the habit of asking those questions, we will become more observant, and our use of time will change. It will lead to little things like phone calls, or a listening ear, or washing the dishes. It might lead to bigger commitments like teaching a Sunday School class or opening our homes to a small group, or becoming a foster parent. It might lead to a career change.

There will be bumps along the way. We will step on some toes. Again and again we will fall back into self-centeredness, just as the disciples did, even after they had three years of face-to-face friendship with Jesus.

And that is where the final words of this passage can be such a comfort. Right after his disciples had blown it with their silly, self-centered argument, Jesus said, “You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (vv. 28-30).

He knew their weakness, but he also knew their longing to get it right. He knows our weakness, but he also knows our longing to get it right. He will be by our side, and we need to be by each other's sides. Little by little our hearts, individually and as a congregation, will become more like the heart of the Gospel: self-giving love for God and for one another.

Let us pray.