

September 3, 2017
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Rom. 12:9-21; Matt. 16:21-28

COVENANT CHILDREN

Everyone who participates in a Montreat Youth Conference is required to sign a covenant issued by the conference center. This applies to the adult advisers as well as the youth. The preamble to the covenant states:

“For this week, we will be doing our best to live together as a family in Christian community. Family life is based on love, respect, trust, support, and spending time together. Each of us is very important as a member of the family. To create and maintain this atmosphere of family and community, we agree to the following covenant:

There follows a list of commitments that each person promises to keep for the conference week. All these promises have to do with living in Christian community. I won't read the whole list, but here are some examples:

- be responsible for our own belongings and respect the property of others;
- keep all our audio devices in our rooms with the volume low;
- participate fully in the events of the conference;
- be responsible in our expressions of care, concern, and intimacy;

There is also a supplemental covenant that all Fellowship and First Pres participants are required to sign. It is a little more direct in regard to that last one relating to intimacy. It says flat out no sexual activity, period. But that covenant also comes down to living as a family in Christian community by treating each other with love and respect.

This passage from Paul's letter to the church in Rome is all about covenant Christian living. It would make a fine covenant standing on its own for the Montreat Youth Conference or any other Christian community. Paul's instructions describe the core values for all activities and ministries of the church, and the individuals who make up the church.

It's a beautiful passage full of hope and reassurance for Christians in good times and in tough times. Twice, Paul exhorts us to rejoice in the privilege. At its heart is nothing less than the revelation of God's everlasting, unconditional love for humankind. Perfect for a day when we celebrate Baptism. Because Baptism, while it is many things, is, at its heart, the sign and seal of entrance into God's divine covenant with humanity. Because God will always in some ways be a mystery to us, we use a lot of metaphoric language to try to explain what it means to be member of this covenant community. We are the body of Christ. All members of his Church are essential parts of his body. We are disciples, followers of the Way, believers. We are children of the covenant. We are the church. Baptism is the sign and seal of our membership in the church of Jesus Christ.

What a wonderful thing that the divine covenant is all about love, hope, trust, and rejoicing! It is not about judgment or punishment. But. You knew there was a "but" coming didn't you. But what about that thing Jesus said: take up your cross. Maybe that doesn't sound so wonderful. Maybe that doesn't sound like cause for rejoicing.

Well, let's look a little closer at what Paul is saying. Bless those who persecute you, do not curse them. Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Live peaceably with all, regardless of their words or actions unless it is absolutely necessary to defend yourself. *Never* seek revenge and *never* judge others. Vengeance and judgment belong solely to the Lord

Christians today are not persecuted by the majority as they were in Paul's day. We are not a people oppressed by the government. But you know what? When I hear Christians saying they are oppressed or persecuted in this country, when I hear people who tout themselves as Christian as they are seeking political office and then spew hate, racism and judgement, *I feel* persecuted, persecuted by my fellow Christians. I've been known to utter a curse or two against them. When I am

sure that someone has wronged me, my impulse reaction is to insist they admit the error of their ways and repent. I want to avenge myself and I definitely judge them.

And what about this “do not be haughty but associate with the lowly.” Ok, don’t bother reminding me of the time you witnessed me being haughty. I know I do it. But you know what? Nobody here is in the category Paul was talking about when he said associate with the lowly. Yea, maybe that’s pretty haughty of me right there. But seriously, who are the lowly in America in 2017? We don’t see them come into church on Sunday morning very often. They occasionally come by the church office hat in hand in need of just enough to keep from being evicted, or just enough to keep the lights from getting turned off, or just enough to get some gas and food so they can get home to a place where they have family that will help them. They are embarrassed and ashamed and always full of explanations for why their current circumstances are temporary and not their fault. The lowly are the homeless, the migrant laborers, the recently released prisoners. They are all around us, but we don’t see them much. As a church, we can’t say we associate with them.

Adhering to the divine covenant is not easy. That’s what Jesus meant when he said if you want to follow him, if you want to call yourself a Christian, you are the one that has to change your way. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him.

I don’t think anyone from Fellowship or First Pres has ever been sent home for breaking the Montreat Conference Covenant. But every year, by the time we get there for week 5 out of the 6, we hear stories about someone who has. It’s always talked about as a bit of juicy gossip, I admit. But it’s also always a sad story because minor violations don’t result in exclusion from the community. You have to have done something that was deliberately intended to cause harm or injury to the fiber of the community to receive that ultimate punishment. And when some

teenager is causing that kind of trouble, it is clearly a symptom of a troubled child whose root problems are not of their own making.

Members of the divine covenant don't have to worry about that kind of sadness. We might choose to exclude ourselves from the community, but we will never be forced out of it. No matter what we do, no matter how many times we break the covenant, God always keeps his end of the deal. Not only does he let us stay in the covenant community, he seeks us out when we stray away. As Christ said, he is always with us wherever we are. All we have to do is turn around and accept his love and forgiveness. Then we can indeed, live our lives rejoicing in his love and goodness.