

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Dr. Simon J. Mainwaring
Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:21-35
September 13, 2020



I offer this parable from life in the Mainwaring household.

A few weeks back, we received our giving statements in the mail from All Saints'. Monica and I received our statement as did the kids, who had each made a pledge to the church last year. A fact, I soon discovered, that was to them entirely ancient history. I proudly delivered each of them their individual envelopes, names printed on the front, 'All Saints' Church' in bold type as the sender. They opened them with delight and speed. At first, there were smiles. Then, looks of confusion took over, followed by silence as they studied the zeroes on the page next to 'giving history' and a dollar amount next to a word that read something like 'outstanding'.

"Is that good?" one of them asked.

"Not really," I replied, as the realization slowly dawned both for me and for them that something here was not right.

"That's what you still have to pay," I offered, opting to forge ahead.

The color flushed from their cheeks.

"Dad, are you charging us for church?" one of them piped up.

Given that church is the 'family business' in our household, I had seen this kind of maneuver before, and so pressed on, undeterred.

"You remember. We walked up to Ms. Ellen's office at church last year and each of us handed her our pledge cards with our tithe - the first 10% of what we earn given to the church."

No. No one remembered that, apparently. I imagine that the school counselor had told them to repress it as a traumatic episode never to be spoken of again.

More silence ensued.

“Why?” one of them offered finally, at a loss as to why they would have done such a thing, or how it could be that the church has such a long memory about a card they filled out all the way back in 2019.

Deciding that this was going nowhere fast, I made for the exit and offered this to conclude things for the night, “We did it because church is a place where we belong to other people. And this is a promise we made to them”.

At which point, I closed their bedroom doors as they quietly wept into their pillows.

We belong to one another. We have made promises to one another. Words we need to hear for ourselves today, many would say, among them former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, Johnathan Sacks, in his new book, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*. In it, Sacks invites us to imagine the kind of life that promises itself to others. One where, and I quote, people ‘each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other’, ‘come together in a bond of love and trust, by pledging their faithfulness to one another, to do together what [we] cannot do alone’.

If my kids would have listened, that’s what I would have said about why we pledge as a family, and why they pledged, because that kind of life together is so incredibly valuable in our world today. We need places in our lives, to quote Sacks again, that ‘bind people together in mutual responsibility and care’. We need for people to live in solidarity with one another, in commitment to, or put in the theological terms Rabbi Sacks offers, in covenant with one another. And for me, a covenantal community that aspires to that kind of shared life, that embodies that kind of faithfulness to others is one I believe all of us might be inspired to support, and generously so.

Yet covenant doesn’t happen accidentally. Just ask any married couple. It takes work. At times it requires us to dig deep. Mercy and honesty are its oxygen supply. It is a gift we have to nurture, and treasure, and prioritize above our own individual wants and needs. This is true for the covenantal life of marriage and it is true of the covenantal life of being church. And central to both, it is utterly true of our covenantal life in relationship with God.

Covenantal life, though, is not a picture of living that gets painted upon a blank canvass. Indeed, the Christian theological conviction that we belong to one another as the body of Christ is not an aspiration that stands unopposed. Specifically, as a preacher I have learned not to underestimate the potency of two immensely influential and formational elements of contemporary life: consumer culture, and cable news and its social media off-shoots.

Reality is that the gospel finds its landing place in the minds and hearts of listeners like you and I who are being shaped continuously by worldviews that are inclined to amplify division and overstate the value of the individual over the value of community. Let's face it, the odds are not in the preacher's favor: church gets one morning a week, FOX and CNN get 24-7.

Add to this already existing backdrop the Coronavirus and how it has put all of our lives on the edge of a certain kind of anxiety and fear of the other, lest an unknown stranger or long-familiar friend get us sick. Today, you and I are living in a certain kind of separateness from other people, and as much as we aspire to be people committed to others, circumstances might drive us to circle our wagons and focus more on me and mine.

These are hard times, yet if we're honest, more so for people you and I may never get to meet, subsisting in circumstances that most of us could barely imagine are possible to subsist within. This has not been an equal opportunity pandemic. They never are. It's a fallacy to say that we are all in the same boat living in the time of Coronavirus. Truth be told we are living in very different kinds of boats across this nation and indeed across the world. Some boats have their own doctor's on board whom the passengers can see any time they like; the living quarters are luxurious and food is aplenty and the greatest daily challenge is often nothing more than feeling bored out at sea. Other boats haven't seen good medical care in years, if ever. Living quarters are crowded and unsafe. And nobody's quite sure if the boat will even make its way through the storm by the time this is all over.

If we are to preach Christ crucified in places like this, let us be clear about whose we are. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not neutral about this two-boat world. It is not indifferent to divisiveness and rampant consumerism. Christians cannot read the Bible on Sundays and then pay their workers unlivable wages on Mondays.

I want to say to you this morning that whatever story you are hearing in your life about the nature of the world we share, however much you are staunchly red or staunchly blue, you and I, now worshipping in the name of the Lord our God, belong to a bigger story. Whether you believe America is indeed humankind's last great hope or whether you believe this country desperately needs to examine its origins and legacies, there is a broader land than this particular one that I invite you to explore with confidence and hope, not because it is religiously interesting, but because it has the power to change your life, and my life, and the world's life. To live a covenantal kind of life is not about piety its about power, the power to transform what we make of this world into the kind of commonwealth God intends for it to be.

We are traveling through the middle passage of a global phenomenon. We can either shrink from the moment, lost in an inertia that accepts the untruth that our problems are too vast and our differences too great, or we can choose to move forward, refusing to settle for less than the gospel that proclaims that none of us are free until all of us are free, that none of us live under justice until all of us do, that none of us have dignity until all of us learn to respect every human being.

I love the church because it plants my feet in a bigger story than the one I am being fed by morally bankrupt political leadership and intellectually vacuous cable news journalism. I love the church because it won't let me settle for merely my own version of the world as if that were how the world actually is, but draws me into communion with others whose difference to me enriches and expands my life. I love the church because it calls me to follow a Savior who gave up life itself for the sake of all other lives.

We, like our ancient Israelite forebears, face monumental challenges. Those men, women and children of old faced death behind them in the form of the Egyptians and their chariots, and death before them in the form of the Red Sea. And then, as the unimaginable was imagined, the waters parted, the once enslaved walked to freedom, and their former masters drowned in the sea in act of divine brutality. Yet, the once enslaved Hebrews did not stay at the shores of the Red Sea. They did not remain there with the images of enslavement and death. They chose to walk on. In doing so, in that moment of decision, they began to make their way from a life that contracted them into slavery to a life that covenanted them to the grace of God, proclaimed in the law received by Moses on Mt Sinai.

Imagine the kind of people we could be if we too were recognizably on our way to a covenant. Imagine what it would be like for our friends and our neighbors, for our families and colleagues, for one another, if we took Jesus' covenantal word to heart to forgive, to forgive always, no matter the size of the hurt or wrong we feel has been done to us.

Why did we want our kids to learn to pledge? Why did we want to teach them that the first ten percent, the first fruits not the leftovers are what we give to the church? Because we want them to grow in their belonging with and commitment to a covenantal kind of life. Perhaps your family is on the advanced placement course through life, but in our household we need grace not merely to be something that mom and dad preach about, we need it to be real, with room for us to be forgiven and then to grow.

Grace will change us should we let it. A life lived in covenant with others is one that is transformative of this world. When you and I can embrace a larger story than merely the one we are individually living in, then the place Jesus called the kingdom of heaven can indeed become a reality on earth. We can repair the breach. We can be better than our lesser instincts. We can be the church; salt in a world that has lost its sense of taste.

I invite you to commit to that, to trust in God's grace, to be the change you long to see, to live into an infinitely bigger story that truly does have room for us all. Let us be on our way to a covenant, hearts set free, minds wide open, lives given away for the life of this world that shout forth with an audacious hope, 'Alleluia anyhow. Amen'.