

“How do you m-ake a covenant?”

Exodus 24:3-8

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Matthew 3:13-17

The title of this sermon is “How do you make a covenant?” but I am going to employ a little bait and switch this morning. I am going to begin with a poker lesson. Before I do, I want to acknowledge that I realize that, even though gambling has become a much more accepted part of our society, the social principles of our United Methodist Church caution against the corrosive effect that gambling has on our society, and that remains both true and relevant today.

I am also very much realize that for some people, even the most seemingly innocent forms of gambling are not just a form of amusement but can lead to some very serious addictions and cause much pain for many people and their families. There may even be people here this morning so effected. I am a person in recovery myself so I know from a very personal dimension the truth of the saying that “but for the grace of God go I.” It is also true that some healthy humor and not taking ourselves too seriously can bring much healing so I use this analogy in good humor and hope it is received in such a manner.

I also realize that some of you may not actually know much about poker and have only the most passing knowledge of it. Perhaps you see a televised poker tournament as you scroll through the channels on cable television. Let me just say that there is a lot of truth in the statement that there are no free poker lessons; if the lesson didn't cost you something it's not poker. My Dad used to have a fitting definition of poker. He called it “robbery among friends.”

In televised poker tournaments all the players are seated around a table. Each one has their pile of chips in front of them that they use to bet on their hand. The hand consists of two cards dealt down to them, their hole cards which only the individual player can see and five cards in the middle of the table that are common to each player.

Sometime you see this circumstance. A player is not doing very well. His or her stack of chips is getting quite diminished while at the same time there are a couple other players with mountains of chips in front of them. The player with the small stack of chips gets a couple hole cards that he believes are reasonably worth betting on, but his stack of chips is so diminished that there is no way he can compete with the other players around the table so he may decide to make a drastic play. He simply says, “All in!” And he pushes all his chips into the center of the table. The other players merely need to match the amount of his wager then the remainder of the cards are turned over to determine the winner. If the player who went “All in” prevails he is all smiles and survives to play another hand. If he loses, he is out of the game and he stoically walks away and the game continues without him.

Can you see how poker can be an analogy for the risks associated with winning and losing in the different seasons and circumstances of life. A number of years ago Kenny Rogers sang a song about poker as an analogy for life. The line I remember is “know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away, and know when to run.”

I want to suggest to you that the analogy of grace is as if God himself, the owner of the casino, has decided to send his son to sit down at our poker table in the person of Jesus Christ. Remember, the owner owns the bank, so when his son sits down at the table he has an infinite reservoir of chips available to him yet the pile in front of him is no larger than anyone else’s. As Jesus proceeds to play his cards he seems to get on a bit of a winning streak for a while then almost intentionally loses as well. Jesus just doesn’t play like the other players.

At times he seems reckless, at other times very cautious, and unlike any other player he has this extravagant generosity about him that is just not heard of at a poker table. To some he is the life of the party, and then to other more seasoned players he has a way of really getting under their skin. Jesus is quite free with his chips. When other players get in trouble he freely lends to them and never keeps a tally. Now, this isn’t technically against the rules, but neither is it the way the game is supposed to be played. And if you don’t play the game the way it is supposed to be played, then we will just have to do something about that.

Jesus has one particular chip that he is continually twirling with his fingers. It is his special chip. He never bets it. He always keeps it close to him. It has a “B” inscribed on one side and an “A” on the other side. In this allegory this is the chip that Jesus received at his baptism. In the relationship of grace it is one of the two words that say it all. It is the word which God uses to describe his son, BELOVED. There is no more precious word. The other word is the word that Jesus uses in response to God – ABBA – which is the intimate form of Father, “Daddy.”

This week I have prayed into the way that Matthew tells of Jesus baptism. It is a small story that is thick with meaning. For a long time I have puzzled over the little discussion that Jesus has with John about who should baptize who. The phrase that I have wrestled with is the reason that Jesus gives to John when he says “it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” “Fulfilling all righteousness” sounds like good religious language but what does it actually mean? Even though John at first objects to baptizing Jesus, this reason seems to make sense to him.

Sometimes you can look too close at something, and I think this was the case here. In order to see this clearly I think we need to step back a little and look at where this is happening. John is baptizing at the river Jordan. The Jordan River isn’t just any river; it is thick with meaning. This is the border of the Promised Land. It is the river that the people of Israel had to cross to enter the Promised

Land. It is also the place where Moses turned over leadership to Joshua. Moses never entered the Promised Land. It is also the place where the prophet Elijah transferred the mantle of his leadership to Elishah. John knows who he is in relationship to Jesus. John knows that Jesus is more powerful than he. John's baptism is one of repentance; Jesus baptism is with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

John knows who Jesus is and he recognizes him, and he just naturally assumes that it is now Jesus who will take over and it is Jesus who will baptize him. But John learns something; he learns to what degree Jesus will become involved in human affairs.

God does not send Jesus just to do something for us. Jesus did not come just to do something to us. In Jesus Christ God came to be fully invested in and within us. Jesus takes his place right in line with everyone else, and when Jesus says that this is proper to fulfill all righteousness he is saying this is the degree to which I am personally invested. This is not a mild source of amusement for me. I am not just carrying out my Father's instructions, I am totally immersed.

To go back to the allegory of the poker game, each one of the players around the table is very engrossed in their own game. Each is playing to win in their own way. None are strangers to being coy; everyone bluffs on occasion, some more successfully than others. All the players have their poker face on. Each player is not above taking an edge if they can find one. Everybody has their own system on keeping track with not just how they are doing but how they are doing in comparison to everyone else. It is important to know who is up and who is down.

At one point in the game, Jesus has accumulated quite a stack of chips. Then comes a turning point. One of his friends is sitting beside him. This friend actually cheats, and while Jesus is not looking he swaps hole cards with him replacing Jesus' cards with some worthless ones of his own.. Jesus pretends not to notice. When the bet comes to him, Jesus quietly says, "All in!" and he pushes all his chips into the center of the table, including that most precious one and he promptly loses the game.

What none of the other players around the table realized was that Jesus didn't sit down at the table because he wanted to win the game. He sat down at the table because he wanted to become thoroughly and intimately invested in the lives of the players.

This morning we have the opportunity to participate in a covenant service. This history of this service goes back to the earliest days of Methodism and was very important to our founder John Wesley. It was the custom that people participated in this service at the beginning of the year, once a year. It was not taken lightly, even to the extent that some may choose not to fully participate.

“Willingness” is absolutely vital to a healthy covenant. This is not Caesar’s census that is required of all people by proclamation, or else. Neither is this dependent on peer pressure, no matter how subtle or how attractive. Making a covenant is of an entirely different cut of cloth than the games we play. No one is measured by how large is the stack of chips in front of them. In fact, no one is measured, but we are all invited.

Making a covenant is saying that, as a part of the community of faith, I am willing to not only sit at the Lord’s Table but I am also willing to, in the ways made available to me, to take a measure of responsibility to being sure that everyone is invited to the table, that everyone enjoys the hospitality of the table, and that there is always a place at the table for one who isn’t quite sure they fit in.

The covenant asks a lot of us. The reality of saying **“I am no longer my own but yours”** has a way of sticking in the craw of most if not all of us, especially if we think we are doing reasonable well at the moment and especially if we, like most of us, have been wounded at the poker game of life more than we care to admit. “Surrender” is rarely option one for us, but this week as I spent some time editing this service for our use I also noticed another phrase that is just as profound.

It is an incredible claim. It is a part of the prayer and it makes this claim about God, **“You are mine.”** God belongs to me?! Yet that is the transaction that occurs at baptism. It is a sealing of the deal that the image of God, our belovedness, is sealed within us, and the grace of God is all the ways we are given the opportunity to respond to that grace. It is why Jesus was willing to sit down at our poker table and play a few hands. He is at our table in order to give us a better invitation, to sit at the Lord’s table where the chip system works very different.

So, which table are you sitting at? That is a question we all struggle to be honest with. I heard a statement at a meeting several weeks ago that is very perceptive in discerning which table we are at. “When I can identify with, I am looking for a way in, and when I compare I am looking for a way out.” Sitting at the poker table is all about who is up and who is down, who is in and who is out, who has more than and who has less than, who is right and who is wrong, and most importantly of all, where am I in it all.

The Lord’s Table is all about identity and identifying with. How do you make a covenant? First of all, be in the presence of the one with whom you are making a covenant. Learn who they are. Learn who they believe you to be. This two sided chip says it all. Who are you in God’s heart? You are beloved. Who does God want to be to you? In God’s silence, God’s omniscient, transcendent silence God says, “Call me Abba, Daddy, Papa.” It is out of such a love as this that we are invited to make this covenant.

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13 January 2008
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto