

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
November 13, 2005

“...So Near As God Shall Give Us Grace”

Acts 2:41-47

Psalm 133

The Covenant (Charlestown, 1630)

We who are now brought together
and united into one Church
under the Lord Jesus Christ, our Head,
in such sort as becometh all those
whom He hath redeemed and sanctified to himself,
do solemnly and religiously,
as in His most holy presence,
promise and bind ourselves to walk in all our ways
according to the rule of the Gospel,
and in all sincere conformity to His holy ordinances
and in mutual love and respect each to other,
so near as God shall give us grace.

In the early years of this congregation, way back in the early 17th century, if you wanted to become a member of the church you didn't just show up for a few information sessions and join. You had to undergo a kind of spiritual security clearance check to show that you were godly and upright. Character and reputation were always taken into account. You also had to persuade the ministers that you had

experienced a genuine conversion by telling them a personal story of sin and grace—a narrative of regeneration. They would judge your sincerity and the correctness of your beliefs, and only on that basis, along with a clean bill of character health, would you be admitted to membership.

These days we are not quite so nosey. The bar is not quite so high. We do, of course, make an effort to get to know each other! We learn about each other's backgrounds, which are usually fascinating, and listen to each other's spiritual travelogues, which these days are often meandering and complicated. But we do not vet people with their employers or sniff out their reputation in their neighborhoods. No one has to recite a narrative of conversion. And we are accepting of divergent point of view regarding Christian doctrine.

Our Puritan forebears adopted more stringent practices because they thought of the church as a pure company of the elect. As a consequence, they needed to separate the wheat from the chaff before they opened their arms in Christian fellowship. Our view of the church today is more like 'Y'all come!'

Our forebears thought of the church as the band of those who had already sought and found the God who spoke once and for all in Scripture and in Christ. We see the church more as a company of those who, reading the same Scripture and following the same Christ, are still seeking a still-speaking God.

They thought that by gathering only bona-fide saints into the church, it would gleam with holiness, pure doctrine, and uniform conviction, radiating back to Christ the glory that is his. We believe that by welcoming all, we'll gleam too—but not with uniformity. Rather, we will shine forth with a heady sort of variety that (we trust) also pleases Christ.

They thought that the church should be like a narrow gate, attracting the convinced. We think that the church should be a breathing space, attracting those who long to know a God they do not yet know, and those who have known a God they long to un-know.

They said, “Go away if you cannot show us that you have reached a certain point on the journey of faith.” We say, “Wherever you find yourself on the journey of faith, you are welcome here!”

We've come a long way from the 17th century Puritan idea of who should be in the church. And yet we agree with our forebears on at least this much—that the church is not some established entity to which, because of whose family you get born into or what country you are living in, you automatically belong. With them we continue to believe that the church comes into being when free people freely associate, compelled by no power or authority but their consciences and the Holy Spirit.

The church is “brought together,” or “gathered” by the Holy Spirit when people agree to walk together along the path that is opened up by the gospel. The church comes into being when free people freely agree to live together in mutual affection and accountability. There is church whenever free people freely choose to do these things “solemnly and religiously,” in the presence of God. We call such an agreement a *covenant*. And everyone who joins our congregation does so by means of simple and solemn agreement—we covenant together, and church is the result!

Just a moment ago we read aloud the covenant that we use here for joining ourselves to each other as members of the church. Because it appears that the original covenant of First Church was lost at some point, in 1872 we apparently borrowed this one for our subsequent use—the covenant that gathered the Charlestown church in 1630. From what we know about Puritan covenants, however, we can safely surmise that our original covenant was not much different in style and content from this one.

Now, in the old days, people who'd been approved for joining the church would sign their names in ink to the church covenant. These days we read it together. A few weeks ago, when some of our newest friends joined the church, we did just that. But several long-time members didn't read the covenant with us. They *recited* it, because they know it by heart. As we got close to its end, however, I noticed that the reciters were out of sync with the readers. There was a bit of stumbling going on.

It turns out that the version of the covenant printed in the bulletin contained a small error. Somehow a “the” got inserted into a phrase

where “the” did not belong, and it was not long before I heard about this mistake. Some of the feedback was along the lines of “Hey, Minister! There was a boo-boo in the bulletin!” But a couple of people wondered whether we deliberately altered the sentence in order to make the old syntax read more like modern English. That would have been hard for them to swallow, since they love the old forms.

Now, you could be tempted to think that people who notice extra definite articles in 17th century sentences don’t have enough to do! But I would have to disagree—in this case, anyway. I took this small outcry as something wonderful. For me it was a sign that the covenant—its words and especially its spirit—has wormed its way deep into the First Church heart. I took it to mean that the covenant is so constitutive of our community that even one inadvertent alteration can and did cause a ripple of communal disorientation.

Of course it is always possible that devotion to language can become idolatrous—to this day, many people believe that God spoke only King James’ English and that all other translations of the Bible are the spawn of Satan. But I don’t think that’s what was going on when I got a couple of emails noting the error in the printed covenant. I think instead that we instinctively sense that our life and ministry cannot

hold and will not endure except by means of the covenant of mutual love and respect that we have freely entered into. The life of this increasingly more diverse, boisterous, active church depends for unity and well-being on a one-sentence promise. It sticks together by the fragile glue of our sincere word to one another. For all its old language and weird syntax, the 1630 covenant is a vital cord that ties us to the beginnings and points us to the end. It is therefore necessary and right that we are careful to say it properly. Keeping the promise keeps the church.

Now, we have to say about the communal life of the church what was once said by somebody about parenthood—it is absolutely necessary and completely impossible. And that is why of all the phrases in the covenant, the last one is the most important: *so near as God shall give us grace*. In other words, when we promise what we promise in our covenant, we mean it sincerely, and we hope that we will be faithful. But we don't expect to keep the covenant perfectly. We recognize that we need help. And if we even come close to faithfulness, it will only be because God's grace is supporting us. Nothing we promise is doable without that assistance.

This is a great comfort to me. It means that imperfection is not failure—and that perfection might be! Did you know, for example, that the newer stained glass windows in the north transept have had to be removed because the lead that held them together was *too pure*? Lead that is too pure soon softens and gives way. The older center window, on the other hand, is held together by lead containing more impurities, and we are told it should hold up for a good long time.

To say, “so near as God shall give us grace,” is an act of much-needed modesty in a world of overblown religious assurances. It is the nudge towards humility that we need when we are tempted to expect and demand too much of each other, or to judge each other too quickly for the smallest mistakes. It is a caveat in the face of our pretensions to build a better mouse trap of a church solely by our own cleverness and labors. It blows the whistle on our bad habits of making everything we do in the church a “job,” and it undermines our tendency to turn ministry into just another garden variety kind of “work.” It teaches us that our relationships with one another can’t thrive unless they are anchored in dependence on God, and that God’s promise to be for us

is the only thing that gives our promise to be for each other a (holy) ghost of a chance of being kept.

If I have one hope for this community, it is that we might continue to grow as a people who know in our bones—who know by heart—not only the words of the covenant but also its truth, and its necessity. A people who know that God's grace is sustaining us, and that nothing else is. I hope that First Church will become a congregation so moved by the unmerited generosity of God to us that everything about us breathes largesse.

In fact, I hope that the Spirit will create here a veritable *culture of grace*. A culture of grace in which astonishment that we are unaccountably acceptable to God translates into extravagant acceptance of one another. A culture of grace in which forgiveness is freely sought and freely given. A culture of grace that is so unpossessive and unafraid that even if our church were to disappear, having given itself away in generous ministry to the world, we would be awed and grateful for our demise, certain that God is somehow thereby still doing great things for us.

Psalm 133 gives us an image of what such a culture of grace could

feel like.

Look how very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life for evermore.

Now, not everyone may think of the 'feel of grace' in terms of oil on the head running down the beard onto the collar of Aaron's robes, but hey... it's the Bible! And this image is in fact an emblem of enormous extravagance from an ancient world in which oil was a precious commodity. To be together here, to be for each other as we have promised in our covenant, is an extravagance as wondrous as pouring oil all over the head in that faraway world.

In our world, people gather mostly for advantage and gain. They congregate for posturing and one-upping. They make and break promises in order to power their way to the top. To agree simply to be

together—to be kindred and to welcome as kindred others who bear no natural resemblance to us; simply to be brought together under one Head of household, the amiable and welcoming Jesus; simply to walk together in all his ways in mutual affection and respect each to other—all this makes no worldly sense. It is a waste of time and resources.

Or so it could seem. But we who have covenanted together in this community can testify to a mystery. We know that this royal waste of time is in fact a luscious and refreshing relief. We experience it like dew on a mountain, like God's blessing ordained there, life for evermore. We know that humbly and faithfully lived, the church—yes, this very congregation!—is in fact the world's breathing space, its drenching rain, its perfumed and healing oil.

Next week we will come to morning worship to celebrate All the saints, and we will also gratefully give each other our pledges for the 2006 fiscal year. Notice that I did not say, "We will make our pledges to support *the church*." That is one traditional way of saying what we will be doing, but to say it that way sometimes sounds as if we making a donation to an *organization*—to an organization, moreover, *that isn't*

us. If we take our covenant to heart, however, we may want to reconceive pledging as *giving to each other*.

Try thinking about it that way, covenantally. Think about our pledging like oil poured upon each other's heads, extravagant and refreshingly good. Think about it as breathing fresh air, filling the lungs with delight. Think about pledging, about receiving and giving, as abundant mutual blessing.

And as with every aspect of our covenant to walk together, we can bless and be generous to each other only so much, only so far, only "so near as God shall give us grace." We need God's graciousness to preside in all our human graciousness. Now, grace is by definition a gift, and Jesus taught us to pray for it. And so here is what I ask. Take a copy of the covenant home with you. Every day of the week between now and November 20, All Saints Sunday, when we will present our pledges, read it or recite it, picturing as you go along all the members and friends of this congregation, its leaders and ministers, all its ministries and programs, its affection and care, its worship and praise, all its children, all our unrealized hopes, all our foibles and failures, our

buildings and needs.

And every time you come to that last line—“so near as God shall give us grace”—humbly acknowledge that it is by grace alone that we have this precious church. And be grateful.

Then pray to be made generous. Pray that everyone who is in covenant with us here will also be moved to generosity. Pray that next Sunday, when we commemorate all the saints, including the very first members of this church who had such hopes for their holy experiment, that both those saints and the Lord of history, who is the God of all gifts, will be delighted with our love for one another, shown forth in the generous gifts we will place in each other's hands. Pray too that God will copiously bless and multiply our gifts for the work of the gospel and the repair of the world.