

A tremendous amount of our lives, whether we're aware of it or not, is dependent on promises. Promises we make, and promises others make to us. Some of those promises are explicitly laid out and formal, like contracts, they're clear. Others are unspoken but implied, like cultural or behavioral norms that guide our actions.

Promises make life a little more predictable and dependable.

But perhaps most importantly, promises make trust possible.

And trust is critical because none of us can live fully without relying on others; relying on others doing what they've said they'll do, being who they've said they'll be.

A world without any trust would be unbearably chaotic and erratic, and deeply stressful, every day would be little more than a fight for survival. It would be awful. A world without any trust would make relationships impossible and a world without relationships would make freedom and fullness of life impossible too.

God calls each of us into being to be free and to live, live fully, and so we need to be in relationship, with God and with each other, and that makes trust essential, and trust depends on our faithfully keeping our promises, promises explicit and implicit, spoken and unspoken.

Some of our oldest stories in Scripture are about God calling God's people into a trusting relationship so that they might come to know the life they were created to live.

After leading the ancient Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, God offers them the Law, it's a way to live, live fully, in relationship, with God and with each other. And to gather up the binding and life-giving promises they'll make to each other, to give this new life shape and form, God invites the people to enter into a covenant: God promises to bring God's people to the promised land so they might live, and tells them, "I will be your God and you will be my people." And the people promise to live faithfully and righteously by keeping God's Law.

The covenant binds them in deep trust, and because of that, offers the people freedom and fullness of life.

The covenant is more than the sum of its promises, it's a way to live. Staying in covenant calls for intentionality, attentiveness, and ongoing participation for the covenant to hold, for it to remain effective and valid. It calls for care in speech and choice and action.

Being in covenant with God should have such an impact on the way that life's lived that it becomes who someone is, it becomes their identity.

Our shared identity, as Christians, comes from our covenantal identity in Christ. Christ promises to bring us into the kingdom of God, so we might know freedom and abundance of life, and Christ tells us "I will be with you until the end of the age." And we promise to love one another as Christ loved us, by loving God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and loving our neighbor as ourselves.

As Christians in this church, we also enter into a Baptismal Covenant, we make additional explicit promises about what our lives in Christ will look like lived.

We promise to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers.

We promise to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord.

We promise to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.

We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves.

And we promise to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.¹

These are powerful promises.

We make them, or they're made on our behalf, at Baptism, and we renew them in our liturgy multiple times every year.

But promises aren't magic. They only have power if we live them, intentionally and attentively, and actually do what we've said we're going to do.

Last week we heard Jesus warning the religious leaders of his time against hypocrisy, promising one thing and doing another. His parable makes the point that those who've made the covenantal promises but have chosen not to live them have taken themselves out of relationship with God; and yet all those who have lived well outside the life called for and expected by the covenant, but have chosen to return to it, to honor, and live into it now, they will be the first to receive God's covenantal promise.

¹ see the Book of Common Prayer pp. 304-5.

This week's Gospel reading follows right on from what we heard last Sunday. In today's parable, Jesus lays out just how bad it can get when there's no trust, when a promise made means nothing.

Again, this is a parable given first for the religious establishment of the day, the "stewards" of God's covenant, the ones whose lives are intended to be an example for others to follow, guides and teachers for how to hold fast to the covenant and live faithfully within it and for it - and he's saying, you all have forgotten who you are, whose you are, you're ignoring your promises, you're ignoring your reason for living. Instead you're living for yourselves, for your own wants and needs - and you're doing whatever it takes to have whatever you want, whatever it is you think you need.

It's really easy for us to hear these parables, know who they were originally for, and assume other people are the problem. It's really easy to shake our heads at all those who've clearly broken their promises, who've visibly and publicly said they'll do one thing and have then done another.

But if we're being entirely honest, we've all done that at some point in our lives.

Every one of us has made a promise we didn't keep, we've all known times when it's been clear what we should do and yet have chosen to do something else. At points in our lives we've all forgotten whose we are, whose Creation this actually is, and have thought we could do what we want, take what we want, have whatever we want, in whatever way we choose.

Jesus' teaching isn't for anyone else, it's for us.

And it's not simply a teaching of critique and judgment.

Jesus is making it clear that whatever we do, whatever we've done, God's covenant is still there for us. However many times we fall away, God will call us back into relationship. However rebellious we are, however far we've wandered off, the love of God is still there for us, because the truth of God is relationship, and relationship is the source of all life.

In our Baptismal Covenant, we promise that whenever we fall into sin, we'll repent and return to the Lord. That's our way back, and it's always there for us, if we choose it. Jesus promises that anyone who comes to him will never be turned away.²

We need promises because we need trust, we need trust because we need one another, and we need one another because we were not created to live this life alone, but to live fully, freely, and abundantly in relationship, in relationship with God, with one another, and with all of God's Creation.

And the very good news about our life in Christ, this life of the New Covenant, is that the first and enduring promise isn't ours. It was, is, and always will be God's.

² John 6:37

