

“The Jesus Covenant”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
October 13, 2019**

New Testament Lesson: Hebrews 5:5-10

Old Testament Lesson: Jeremiah 31:31-34

A 3-year-old and a 5-year-old were playing on the floor while the adults finished dinner. Lisa, the 5-year-old, opened her new toy nurse’s kit and finally convinced her brother to be the patient.

She took the little stethoscope and placed it on her brother’s chest. Listening intently – doop-toop doop-toop doop-toop – she suddenly announced: “I hear somebody walking around in there.” Doop-toop doop-toop doop-toop. The adults smiled knowingly. But little Ryan, the 3-year-old, stated with sweet simplicity: “That must be Jesus.” And so it is.¹

Jesus is in our hearts. Has been ever since he sent the Holy Spirit upon us at Pentecost, equipping the disciples – and us – to be the church, to be the hands and feet and heart of Jesus. Prior to that time – prior to having the Spirit of truth within us – we had the Law, the Law of God as delivered to us by Moses. Remember Moses? Moses descended Mount Sinai with two stone tablets. On those tablets, God himself had written the Ten Commandments.

From that time forward, Moses and the Israelites lived according to God’s law and all the follow-on teachings and restrictions that Moses provided them, as given to him by God. Now, when I say they lived according to God’s law and the teachings and restrictions that followed, what I mean to say is they did their best. And sadly, their best was only so good, took them only so far in becoming who God created them to be, created us to be.

As humans, we are a squirrely bunch. If there’s a loophole to be had, and line to cross, and grey area to exploit, we will find a way to step through that loophole, cross that line and fudge that grey area. We generally don’t do so well with simple choices of black or white, good or bad, right or wrong.

That is why – as God led the people of Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land of Canaan – we strayed from the path. For instance, God told us to freely eat of the Manna from heaven – a mysterious food source in the wilderness – but to only eat what we needed as it fell to earth each day, to not store any overnight.

¹ As told by the Rev. Mary Birgelaitis, <https://www.homileticsonline.com>.

And of course, instead of trusting that God would provide, we hoarded the Manna for ourselves till the next day. By morning, the Manna had turned to worms, because we didn't have faith enough to follow God's instruction. To the letter of the law. Just one of many examples where the people of God crossed the line, to their own detriment and downfall. And yet, each time, God reached out and lifted them back up and set them on course again.

Despite God's love for us, we just couldn't keep his commandments and follow his instructions. And this created a separation between us and God. We used our God-given free will to do things our way instead of God's.

But of course, God knew this was coming. God used our defiance as a learning experience for us, a critical step in our spiritual growth. And at some point, we finally hit rock bottom; for the Israelites, it was their captivity in Babylon that Habukkuk lamented, which the Adults Sunday School class heard about today. In fact, it's at the exact point in the middle of his lament that Jeremiah speaks the word of God. In our Old Testament lesson today, Jeremiah points to a new pathway for us to follow, the pathway we are on right now.

Today's pathway is different from the pathway followed by the ancient Israelites, our spiritual ancestors. Today we are no longer confined to the letter of the law, but rather free to discern and follow the spirit of the law.

In this freedom to follow the spirit of the law, we find the grace and mercy of the Lord, gently nudging us forward every step of the way, as we live into the fullness of our relationship with God, one another and all creation.

The spirit of the Law -which is higher than the letter of the law- comes to us through a new covenant between God and all people of the earth, all people that is who are willing to enter into covenant with God through Jesus Christ.

In the Book of Jeremiah we read, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors, when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people."

Those who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are no longer led solely by the teachings and restrictions of the Old Testament. Now we are led by our hearts, by the Spirit of God living within us, which no loophole, grey area or right-or-wrong debate can wiggle past.

There is no getting around the Spirit of righteousness that lives within you. You can defy it, yes, but you cannot escape it. God's eternal love will never let you go. God's divine judgment will always reign supreme. God's Spirit living among us and within us will always nudge us in the right direction, moment by moment, from first breath to last. "No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord."

In other words, we don't need people telling us what's right and what's wrong. We know it in our hearts – or we can discern it, when we seek the counsel of those whom God has placed alongside us, to guide us on the path of Jesus Christ. A divine sense of right and wrong lives within us and among us.

Take for instance, a certain lawyer who was teaching his son, Ed, about ethics. "Ed," he said, "suppose that one day a gentleman comes into my office with a simple question. Upon answering the man's question, I charge him \$100.00. He is outraged at the bill for such a simple question but agrees to pay. The man reaches into his wallet and grabs a hundred-dollar bill and thrusts the money into my hand. After he leaves, I notice that the man has, in fact, given me two \$100 bills. Now, Ed, here's the ethical question: Do I share that money with my partner?" Right and wrong, black and white, the spirit of the law or some legal loophole. We know when we've crossed the line. We don't need anyone to teach us that – "No longer shall they teach one another ..., ' says the Lord. ... For they shall all know me."

God has placed within us the Spirit of the Law. We know in our heart of hearts what's right and what's wrong. Or if we're struggling, we can discern and discover what's right, what's most important, what is the Spirit of the law. And here's how we do that:

We know we are on the right path when that path is leading us to life and love and freedom – a life in service to the Lord, the love of God and one another, and the freedom to give of ourselves for the sake of others. Not always easy, but no one said following Jesus was easy, only life giving, joyous, full of hope for tomorrow and peace for today. If that's not your life- joy, hope and peace-maybe some prayer and discernment would help; I'm sure it would, and I'm here to guide you if you like.

We in this church are blessed in so many ways. One of the greatest blessings we have is to share the faith and fellowship of the Lord with one another.

We do that through the giving of our time, talents and money. We do that through a mutual care and compassion for one another. We do that by giving of ourselves in ministry and leadership.

The time is coming when we will again be asked to affirm our covenant with God through our 2020 stewardship time next month, and also during our nominations process for church officers and committee members, those faithful souls in the ministry of leadership and service.

The time is also coming for our young people in the Tuxis Confirmation class – six young people who last week began the process of discerning their call as followers of Christ Jesus. They, too, are on the pathway of faith formation, and it is up to us to be here for them, in covenant with God.

As you discern the many choices that freedom in Christ affords us – afford you- do so always in keeping with the Spirit of God, the Spirit that lives in your heart, as discerned and affirmed through the church, through the faithful gathered here as one to love and serve the Lord.

If you do that – if you continually seek the Lord's guidance and follow his will – then you will know right from wrong, a right and wrong not born of our limited vision and self-centered motives, but rather born of God, for no other purpose than to show God's love for us and lead us to love God – and one another – in return. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

(taken from Psalm 51 10-12;15-17)

Create in us a clean heart, O God and put a new and right spirit within us. Cast us not away from thy presence, and take not thy holy Spirit from us.

Restore to us the joy of thy salvation, and uphold us with a willing spirit.

O Lord, open thou our lips, and our mouths shall show forth thy praise. For thou hast no delight in sacrifice; thou wouldst not be pleased.

The sacrifice acceptable to you, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, thou wilt not despise.

We thank you, O God, for your word to us, and your Spirit that dwells within us. We pray your healing touch upon Ed Hatcher, your strength for Jill and all the family, your wisdom and guidance that the doctors would find a way to restore him to good health.

We pray for Kathy Kilgore, that the infections would be cured.

We pray for all who need your Spirit to guide them, comfort them, sustain them, and enliven them.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, using the words that he taught us, saying together:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**