

*Unspoken Covenant*  
by Rev. Stephanie Shute Kelsch  
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Perhaps some of you have heard the witticism attributed to George Bernard Shaw, “God created man in his image, and then man returned the favor.” God’s covenant with Noah after the flood - and the rainbow used to remind God of that covenant - puts me in mind of Shaw’s insight this morning. God keeps making covenants with humanity throughout the Bible. By the time we get to the Flood and the covenant with humanity through Noah, only nine chapters into Genesis, there have already been two covenants. First is the covenant in Eden, setting up the relationship between God and humanity in the Garden of Eden. And then when Adam and Eve break part of that covenant by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a revised covenant, called the Adamic Covenant, follows. I’m reminded of new parents trying to figure out what to DO with this child they’ve created. One could look at the evolution of covenants as being, in some ways, God figuring out how to manage the newly created humans ... or, if you’re George Bernard Shaw, you might see it as humans figuring out how to describe what they’re figuring out about this Source of Life they call God figuring out how to handle them.

It takes some figuring.

Covenants are a challenge. They’re even more complicated than the congregation norms that we heard about in this morning’s reading. When Oswald and the Heaths refer to children in the kitchen or routes into the church or what’s behind closed doors, they’re really referring to things that can be addressed in a rather straightforward manner through sensitivity and communication. They can be spoken, they can be rather quickly articulated once a situation or question comes up - and often are when parents are inculcating family values and traditions in their children.

It's good to consider norms in a church as they can become stumbling blocks on the way to covenant. Certainly it's reasonable to recognize the similarity between the "code" of families and the "norms" of congregations. In both cases we become bound together by love and commitment, acceptance and care. I would, however, strongly insist that while a church may reflect family systems and be welcoming of a wide variety of personalities, it is still an institution with responsibility not to abuse or to allow abuse within the scope of accepting everyone. As a church we have a responsibility to something greater, higher – and that reality lifts us from dealing just with "norms" into the realm of "covenant."

Covenant is, as I've said, a challenge. And covenant is a particular challenge in our modern, consumer-driven world. Presbyterian minister Timothy Keller writes:

"Sociologists argue that in contemporary Western society the marketplace has become so dominant that the consumer model increasingly characterizes most relationships that historically were covenantal ..... Today we stay connected to people only as long as they are meeting our particular needs at an acceptable cost to us. When we cease to make a profit - that is, when the relationship appears to require more love and affirmation from us than we are getting back - then we "cut our losses" and drop the relationship. This has also been called "commodification," a process by which social relationships are reduced to economic exchange relationships, and so the very idea of "covenant" is disappearing in our culture." (Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God*)

The late Catholic priest Henri Nouwen places this shift in a spiritual context, telling us that:

"In our society we don't speak much about covenants; we speak about contracts. When we make a contract with a person, we say: 'I will fulfill my part as long as you fulfill yours. When you don't live up to your promises, I no longer have to live up to mine.' Contracts are often broken because the partners are unwilling or unable to be faithful to their terms.

“But God didn’t make a contract with us; God made a covenant with us, and God wants our relationships with one another to reflect that covenant. That’s why marriage, friendship, life in community are all ways to give visibility to God’s faithfulness in our lives together.” (*Henri J.M. Nouwen Bread for the Journey: A Daybook of Wisdom and Faith*)

So this covenant thing is much bigger than contract. It is a promise to something bigger than the sum of the parts; it involves mutual responsibility; it requires a flexibility of trust and faith and love within a steady framework of trust and faith and love. You see the paradox – the fluidity of change within the constancy of commitment. It is indeed easier to focus on contract!

Second Parish has a beautiful, succinct covenant. One that we say together every Sunday – not, perhaps, unlike God needing the rainbow to remember what’s involved here. It’s not the church’s original covenant, which was much longer and much more descriptive. Our present covenant is based on what’s called the Ames Covenant written around 1880 and present in our hymnal as #472; it was modified and adopted almost thirty years ago.

Usually when I’ve shared our covenant at seminary or with other clergy, people nod and say, “How lovely. How inclusive – there really is room for everyone in that.” One day I shared it, however, and my listener expressed those same sentiments and then fixed me with a look and asked, “And what’s your unspoken covenant?”

So here we come to the heart of the matter. What is the unstated promise that endures here? What is the promise that cements relationship in the context of something bigger than the individual, in a faith setting that so fiercely honors the individual? What has been so present that we can feel it doesn’t need to be repeated like our spoken covenant?

I find this a question of gravity and would almost rather scurry back to talking about norms. It would be much more satisfying, not to mention safer, to explain that we’re wary of extension chords because of times when receptions have faltered because of too many

coffee pots plugged in. Or to explain hyper sensitivity to fire not just because we have an old building, but because there was a fire that started on the roof in 1976, a fire that the Fire Chief said was ten minutes from destroying the church.

Having promised to talk about our unspoken covenant, however, that is what I must do. As I did last week, I welcome your feedback and will be just as appreciative of your views as I am of the insights some of you shared after last week's sermon on "Why Second Parish?" Here is what I see as the unspoken covenant at Second Parish:

We accept the tension or the energy present when individuals who ferociously claim their individuality are united for the good of all. We expect to disagree, but we also expect to co-exist and where we cannot agree, to reconcile by continuing to listen to each other, continuing to speak. One result of embracing this process is that we are prepared for things to take time, and we see such time as a good investment.

But not only do we promise to stay in conversation, we also promise to act. Second Parish is a church of doers. Most of them are very modest about it, too. What people do here is not for status or even power. It's not about resume items. People "do" from a depth of feeling, wanting to see the good result more than the recognition. Things are done for a greater good.

This willingness to accept tension, to allow time, to continue the conversations, to serve humbly, to be a part of something and not THE thing itself comes, in part, from taking the long view. Second Parish has been here for the long haul. Most of the parishioners feel they are here for the long haul. Even if they should leave, due to relocation of home or changing of spiritual needs or worn out from the work of church – and yes, church, asks even as it gives in abundance - they know they always have a home here. Forever.

This also means that the stories of this particular church matter. Our narrative, the long historical one and the more immediate individual ones matter. They are told and retold;

lived and relived; and shared in defining what we value and how we work. And because our stories matter, continuity matters. This hardly means that we don't change. We do change. We have changed. We will change further. But change is woven by the fabric of our values – our values drive the change, rather than change driving our values. By that I mean we do not change for change's sake. Our change is informed by deeper sources.

Were these elements of our unspoken covenant to be written, we would be making a promise to live with differences of opinion, to take time, to act, speak, and listen with a sense of a bigger picture, to find strength and direction in our past, our present, and our future. Our pledge promises us continuing guidance, evolving purpose, steady home. The entire unspoken covenant does indeed involve a sense of something bigger.

These are specifics of love and respect.

Interestingly enough, I could parse all these things out of our spoken covenant. A fitting conclusion to these thoughts would thus be for you to please join me in saying together once again, the Second Parish Covenant: With love for each other and respect for each person's search for truth, we unite, in the spirit of Jesus for the worship of God and the service of our neighbors.

May it ever be so.