

The First Baptist Church, Midland
October 18, 2009
2 Corinthians 8:1-7

An Oath of Loyalty

A Communion Meditation by the Rev. John P. Dick

Theme: The Lord's Supper

A terrible storm materialized out of nowhere and two hearty sailors found themselves adrift without their boat, clinging to life on top of a broken hull. Having been lost at sea now for more than two days, they had just about given up hope of rescue. That's when one of the sailors began to pray: *O Lord, I've led a worthless life. I've been unkind to my wife and I've neglected my children. But if you'll save me, I promise I'll...*

Suddenly, out of nowhere the praying sailor's friend shouted, *Hold it Hank! Before you go any further and regret it, I think I see land!*

I suppose it can be said that when the circumstances warrant it, a person will make just about any kind of a promise before God. How about it... have you ever found yourself in such a compromising position? *O Lord... if you will help these doctors find out what's wrong and make me well again, I promise you I'll... if you'll get me out of this tight spot God, I promise I'll... if you'll only help me get into my college of first choice, I promise you I'll... if you'll help me pass this exam and get through this statistics class I promise I'll...*(Opps, that was mine) And one of my favorites – *Lord, if you will only let my numbers come up in the lottery, I promise I'll give a tenth to my church.* I can't tell you how many times I have heard that one.

Yes, we lift up our prayers and sometimes have to chuckle at our own frailties. But there are other promises that we make in the presence of God... promises not born out of desperation but out of love and commitment. For example: *I John take you Paula to be my wedded wife; to have and to hold from this day forward; for better for worse; for richer for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish; till death do us part according to God's holy ordinance.* Or what about the response we made once upon a time to life's most important question: *Do you believe in Jesus Christ and accept him as your personal Lord and Savior?* As we said "yes," we carried with our affirmation the intention of faithfully following in the steps of our Master. It was, in a sense, our oath of allegiance.

This morning we are going to look closely at promises related to faith. A long time ago in the Christian church's first generation of existence, the word *sacrament* took on an important meaning for the new believers. William Barclay in his book entitled, "The Lord's Supper", describes this sacrament as a pledge or a bond. He compares it to the earnest money we put up when purchasing a house. It is a sign or a promise of intent.

Now you know that each month on the first Sunday, we celebrate the Lord's Supper because it reminds us all over again of our intention to follow Jesus. And that's

why some of the more liturgical churches refer to this experience as a sacrament. It is a sign or a promise of God's intent to come into and to be part of their lives, followed by the faithful believer's intent to embrace God in their hearts.

Eventually, as with all things, there was a transition that took place in this thinking. And it was connected to another word closely linked to sacrament... *sacramentum*.

The *sacramentum* was a term used to describe a Roman soldier's oath of loyalty to the emperor. It was also used to describe a citizen's pledge of allegiance to his or her country. Once again, you can see the obvious application within the life of the church. The young Christian community looked upon the point of confession as an oath of allegiance to the Lord.

Finally, by the time we get to the fourth century A.D., an early church father named Augustine came into the picture and brought to this concept yet another new level of meaning. Still carrying the implication of a promise or an oath, it also took on the connotation of a sign or a symbol with a meaning beyond itself. Put another way, the sacrament came to be understood as something simple to which we give greater significance.

For example, many of us wear on our left hand a wedding ring. In most cases, it is probably not worth a lot of money but you wouldn't give it up for anything. That is because it has sacramental value for you. It stands for a relationship in your life that is precious. It is a sign of something that bears much greater worth than the ring itself.

Now tie this back again to our monthly tradition around the Table. Jesus took two very common items that we use everyday – bread and wine – and gave to them sacramental or symbolic meaning. Yes, these are very simple elements which carry extremely important truths for they symbolize for us the promise that Jesus made to his believers. And in turn, they symbolize and remind us of the promises we have made to God.

That is why we take this table so seriously. That is why we commemorate the Lord's Supper. Each month we begin all over again to remember what God has done for us through the sacrifice of his Son. We remember in spirit if not in word the incredible promises: **“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”** (Romans 10:9) **“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** (1 John 1:9) Oh, the power of these promises.

Now I trust you see the point of this simple journey back in time to the place where our promises originate. Today we are celebrating what we call Consecration Sunday. I've been asked more than once, what exactly does consecration mean? Simply stated, to consecrate means “to set apart as holy”. It means “to make or declare something sacred for religious use” (Webster's New World Dictionary, 1986).

This is certainly not a new concept as we have just seen, but is a part of Christian community from the very beginning. The story we read taken from Paul's letter to the Corinthians illustrates what we mean. It was a common practice in the early church for people to give of themselves and their resources in a very generous way, and with utmost delight because they knew their gifts were going to further the work of the Kingdom. There are multiple stories that could be referenced. But here's the point.

These folks made a faithful promise to follow the Lord Jesus and in keeping with that promise they made a commitment to sustain the important work to which they believed they were being called. And their gifts toward that end were considered holy. They were consecrated... set apart as sacred and intended for religious use. In the context of the passage read this morning, it meant building up a sister congregation. But there are many stories of congregational self care as well. In other words, it was right in the life of the early church to give generously as a token of the promise of faith made before God. And guess what... it's still right today.

That's why we come this morning declaring our intentions of faithfulness in the new year. We love because he first loved us and we give because He gave himself to show us a better way of living and to usher us into what Matthew calls Kingdom of Heaven.

So each year we come to this point of promise and we ask ourselves, *to what am I committed and how will I respond?* It's a very personal decision and it represents the passion surrounding our promises.

I'd like to close with a wonderful story I heard a long time ago. It was noon, in the south and it was summer. You know what that means. It was hot, and two men were working in a railroad yard. They were swinging eight pound sledgehammers, driving spikes into railroad ties. But then something caught their attention and they stopped when they noticed one engine and one "very fancy car" going slowly through the yard. The engine stopped in front of them, a window in the fancy car came down, and a man stuck his head out of the window and said, "Charlie, is that you, my friend?" One of the workers in the yard put down his sledge and replied, "Joe, I haven't seen you in..." And the other man finished the sentence, "Twenty five years. Come in out of the sun so we can talk." The man in the yard wiped the sweat from his body, put on his T-shirt, and went into the car. About a half-hour later, he came out of the car. Charlie and Joe shook hands. The car slowly pulled out of the yard, and Joe leaned out the window once more and said, "Let's keep in touch." The car disappeared down the tracks.

The man who had been left working with the sledge hammer for the last half-hour asked, "Do you know who that is?" and answered himself... "That's the president of the railroad! How do you know him?"

Charlie replied, "We started to work twenty five years ago out here in the yard." Then the worker asked two more questions: "You mean the president of the railroad

started out here, swinging a sledgehammer?" "Yes," was the reply. "Then, how come he's the president, and you're still out here in the yard?"

Charlie pondered a moment and then said: "Twenty five years ago, I came to work for \$1.25 an hour. But he came to work for the railroad!" ((“Working and Living,” Vital Speeches, LXIII (15 April 1997), 413)).

Wow! What a perspective. I think it relates to what we are about today, don't you? For we each need to ask ourselves, *for whom am I working?* Am I here giving just a little of myself and hoping to receive a lot. Or am I here deeply committed to working for the church... to working for the Lord? **“each of us must give as we have made up our mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”** The wisdom of Paul writing to the people of Corinth... the spirit of the Christ speaking to the world.

Amen and AMEN!