

Church of the Crossroads
Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
Stewardship Sunday
November 11, 2007
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THE STEWARDSHIP OF THE WHOLE OF LIFE

Isaiah 28:14–22

Hosea 2:16–23

Psalm 16

John 10:1-10

In the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, we may discover a contrast between two different kinds of covenants. In Isaiah, we hear about a covenant human beings can make with death.

Therefore hear the word of the Lord, you scoffers
who rule this people in Jerusalem.
Because you have said, “We have made a
covenant with death
and with Sheol we have an agreement;
when the overwhelming scourge passes through
it will not come to us;
for we have made lies our refuge,
and in falsehood we have taken our refuge.

—Jer 28:14–15

In the days of the Assyrian ascendancy to power in the latter half of the eighth century BCE, the prophet believes that the leaders of Judah have forsaken God, their only defender, to seek foreign military aid against their enemy. This, the prophet says, constitutes a covenant with death. At the heart of this covenant with death, there is a profound irony. Judah aligns itself with death in order to escape death. Of course, it cannot work, and as it turns out, it doesn't work. Judah is eventually annexed to the Assyrian Empire.

Making a covenant with death in order to escape the power of death—I am thinking about how we do the same in our world, and how ironic it is. In order to protect ourselves from terrorism, we inflict terror and death upon the Iraqi people, only to find ourselves in the end less protected from terrorism than ever before. In order to secure ourselves and “move forward”

economically, we speed up the depletion of the earth's resources and surround ourselves with more and more material things which, in the end, only serve to make us more and more vulnerable to the effects of climate change and therefore less secure economically.

On a very personal level, we do the same with our own lives, even those of us who work so tirelessly for peace and justice in the world. In order to save the world for life, we can easily end up making a covenant with death, the death of ourselves. Words written by Thomas Merton will serve to explain what I mean by this. Said Merton:

There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by non-violent methods most easily succumbs: activism and over-work. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his/her work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his/her work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful.

In order to save the world for peace, we do violence to ourselves, only to find ourselves becoming less and less fruitful in our work and witness. How ironic. In order to save the world for life, we end up making a covenant with death, the death of ourselves.

I encountered these words of Thomas Merton only a week ago at a "Courage to Teach" retreat based on the work of Parker Palmer, and co-led by Crossroader Joanne Cooper. The words spoke to me particularly, because I began that retreat exhausted from too much activity, some of it life-giving, such as the activity surrounding Glenda Wildschut's time with us, but much of it not. I found that I was out of touch with my inner life and the "root of inner wisdom" (Merton's phrase), which can be the only source of a fruitful labor. I vowed to myself, and I will share my vow with you: "Neal, you are going to have to slow down. You are going to have to pull back from all those involvements in the world and for the next ten months focus primarily on the involvement you love most – being the pastor and teacher of Church of the Crossroads. You need to spend more time with the people you know and love and less time trying to save the world. You do not want to end your

pastorate depleted and exhausted. That would not be fair to you or to anyone.” To tell you the truth, the words “activist” and “activism” are becoming suspect words in my vocabulary. These days, when I am called an activist, I cringe, because I know that I am falling into the trap Thomas Merton writes about. It is so easy for us, in our attempts to save the world for life, to make a covenant with death, the death of ourselves.

Contrasted to the description of the covenant of death in the Book of Isaiah, we discover in the Book of the Prophet Hosea, God’s covenant with life:

On that day, says the Sovereign God, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Baal,” For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you will know God.

—Hosea 2:16–20

You may remember that Hosea, the prophet, has married Gomer, a prostitute in the worship of Baal, in order to say to the people of Israel that God was ready to take back a people who had forsaken God. God was ready to offer Israel a covenant to uphold and sustain the whole creation and all people with life rather than death and with peace rather than war and violence. From our Gospel reading for today, we are reminded of Jesus, the good shepherd, who came so that all may have life and life abundantly.

Surely, we want to be part of God’s covenant with life rather than commit ourselves to any kind of covenant with death. Surely, we want to be on the side of life rather than death.

And now for the truth for today, it being Stewardship Sunday. We are called to be stewards of the whole of life, not just the life of the world, but also of the life within, and not just our own lives, but also the lives of our brothers and sisters in our beloved community of Crossroads, and not only

the lives of those who know and love, but the lives of those beyond our community of faith, and not only the lives of those beyond our community of faith, whether they live in Iraq, or Palestine-Israel, or the Sudan, or on our beaches, but also the life of the creation itself. We are called to be stewards of **the whole of life**. As stewards of the whole of life, we are thrust into an active engagement with that which threatens life in all its dimensions. In this engagement, we are to be on the side of life rather than death.

It is a large vocation, this vocation of stewardship. It will require, in the words of Parker Palmer, undivided lives. So much of life these days is divided. We find ourselves so immersed in the life of the world, or in our professional lives, that we have forgotten the health of ourselves. Or, we are so caught up in selfish forms of spirituality that we forget the needs of the poor, or the needs of the creation itself. We live divided lives. A divided life is the breeding ground for a covenant with death. Parker Palmer, through the Center for Courage and Renewal, is helping teachers and pastors and business people make the journey toward undivided lives, so that who we are as human beings and what we do in the world will be brought into a seamless whole. To be faithful stewards of the whole of life will require us to pay attention to the interconnection between the life within and the life of the community of faith, and human life beyond the community of faith, and finally, the life of the creation itself. We are called to live life undivided. We are called to care for the whole of life.

And the good news is, the good news I want to share with you today, is that we are not alone. For the covenant with life that we seek to nurture within ourselves and within the life of the world is **God's** covenant. And, as the Psalmist says, if we keep God always before us, God will be at our right hands, and we shall not be moved. Our hearts will be glad and our souls will rejoice. Our bodies will also rest secure. (Ps 16:8–9) Or, in the words of a statement of faith of the United Church of Canada:

We are not alone, we live in God's world.
 We believe in God:
 who has created and is creating,
 who has come in Jesus,
 the Word made flesh,
 to reconcile and make new,
 who works in us and others by the Spirit.
 We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:
to celebrate God's presence,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus,
crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.
In life, in death, in life beyond death,
God is with us.
We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

And so, my brothers and sisters, there cannot be anything that has the power to keep us from being on the side of life in the midst of all that death of human creating, to keep us from fulfilling our calling as stewards of the whole of life. May God grant us the grace and courage so to be.