

Joseph Smucker, October 26, 2014

“Our covenant with each other”

John 14: 5-11
Matthew 7: 1-5

Last Sunday we heard a remarkable sermon on Moses and his covenant with God. Also explained to us was the relationship between our image of God and the issue of free will.

This Sunday we turn our attention to the idea of covenant with our fellow human beings.

The dedication of baby Elfrieda is a perfect expression of the meaning of covenant with others. As participants in the dedication, we commit ourselves as a community to the nurturing and growth of Elfrieda.

Similarly, we can think of our interaction with others; our obligation to respect them; to seek a common humanity rather than fueling the fires of indifference, and of enmity and hatred. The events of this past week stretch the limits of our compassion. (Upon hearing the news of the assassination I could not help wondering if sending humanitarian aide to refugees in Syria rather than fighter jets would have had a different effect.)

The New Testament reading from John emphasizes the importance of a firm grounding of belief and commitment to the teachings of Jesus and his ethic of love and compassion.

In the passage from John, Thomas and Philip are seeking some signs of verification for the truth of Jesus' teaching. It is a reasonable request, I think. But Jesus answers by stating that belief starts with faith in the certitude of the premise that He, Jesus, represents the essence of God.

At first, this assertion seems hard to accept. Why can't Jesus point to some evidence?

But consider that this requirement of “faith” is not as unusual as it may seem. In secular terms, it is a response that is similar to scientific inquiry: Unless the

scientist makes an assumption that a phenomenon may exist, she/or he cannot carry out an empirical inquiry into the nature of its existence or, if it exists at all.

Similarly, this passage from John implies that unless we make an assumption of the validity of the teachings of Jesus, we cannot relate to others in a life-supporting way.

We have here a sort of mix between two dimensions the early Greeks delineated regarding how we, as humans, approach the world, and each other. We may do so through **“logos” or rational thought**, or through **“gnosis”, an intuitive feeling or apprehension of emotional or spiritual truths**. In fact, we employ both systems. In modern terms we refer to rationality and intuition/or “feelings” and of the two, we, in the current Western world, tend to emphasize the idea of rationality. (Of course, I am using a rational approach in citing these differences!)

In the passage in John, Jesus is asking for trust based on an intuitive sense of correctness: on faith.

(It is interesting that in our modern rationalistic age the search for intuitive truths has become big business: programs of “mindfulness”, yoga, etc. And yet at the same time, many religious groups seek to rationalize their beliefs by insisting that each Biblical passage represents literal truth.)

Does this mean that we exclude other religions and even secular philosophies that also emphasize love and respect toward others? It would be hard to accept this assumption.

Following from the reading from Matthew, there is the suggestion that we find common ground with others; removing the “beam” that is in our own eye—the barriers we erect in rational thought--before we seek to remove the mere speck of sawdust from the eye of another.

The passage in Matthew points out that in our relationships with others, we need to examine our own character before passing judgment on others. We need to recognize both our own frailties as well as strengths in our interaction with others. As one Mennonite theologian pointed out: The truth we claim as Christians also affirms the dignity of others, their culture and their convictions. (John Howard Yoder)

The message of love is a message daring us to respect diversity; to make ourselves “vulnerable” much like students make themselves vulnerable to the teacher as they learn subject material in their classrooms.

This further suggests that complacency is not what a covenant implies. Rather it is a commitment to engage in the process of loving, of nurturing, of honoring and supporting the integrity of an individual. Note that this is not necessarily “rational” in a “cause-and-effect” manner.

How do we maintain such a covenant with others in a world in which we constantly come up against change and diversity? Most of us tend to seek certainty. We build systems and organizations that ensure predictability and certainty. We use frameworks of meaning to interpret behavior. By naming things and behaviours, we create a sort of structured, static reality.

The American psychiatric profession publishes a huge manual, “The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” listing a huge array of behavioural “disorders”, for most of which drugs are recommended. (Each edition of the manual has more entries.)

But the British Psychiatric Assoc. has pointed out that many of these labels are “normative” and assume some sort of standard, rationalized model that defines “normality” for individuals. (They also note the ties the editors have with drug companies.) Rationality takes over where intuitive sensibilities once played a role.

Frameworks of certainty that we build are often not sustainable and they often cause us to look for solutions in the wrong place. (Thomas Kuhn and “paradigm shifts”.) This occurs even within our own families. Different stages of life present different challenges among family members. Our children grow up; unexpected events happen. We need to shift our perspectives.

For Example: as parents, most of us have experienced the excitement of our child’s first scientific experiment: do plants grow better when subject to the sound of classical as opposed to hip-hop music? We think that this will perhaps be the beginning of our child’s career in botany, or biology or medicine. A great beginning requiring great amounts of encouragement! But then our child’s interests turn to other things—perhaps because the project does not do so well at the school science fair. And we, as parents, have to make the choice: do we strongly encourage our child to pursue science? Or do we remind ourselves to love and support our child as she herself explores different interests? Is our covenant

one of control (the Tiger Mom) or one of watchfulness, guidance, support and respect?

What is the essential “core” that we commit ourselves to? It is not what one does. It is rather that indescribable sense of “oneness” that we feel toward others. Those feelings are often expressed through music, ritual, and meditation rather than rational analysis.

I was struck by the woman who ran to give aid to the fallen soldier, shot this week while standing guard at the national cenotaph. She did not repeat to the dying man that they were stanching his blood; that the technicians were doing all they could. Rather she repeated how much he was loved, by his family and all who knew him.

A covenant with our fellow human beings, in the religious sense, is not based on rational assessments; on logos. Rather it is based on empathy, on gnosis; that sense of unity and compassion toward others; while realizing that we have our own faults, failures and weakness—the “beams” in our eyes.

Of course, on the “rational” side, covenants can be a bit like contracts. They are promises that assume honesty and integrity on the part of both parties. But the actual definition of what this means can still differ. Cultural differences are one source of misunderstandings in the meaning of covenant. The differences may have something to do with the degree of emphasis placed on forms of rationality as opposed to “feelings” or intuitions of correctness. We in the West tend to think that the signing of a contract on a piece of paper is all that is required in forming a business covenant. The signature on paper takes the place of “the word”.

But signing a contract in S. Korea is not so simple, nor “rational”—at least in Western terms. One of my last research projects was focused on business ethics. I was interested in cross-cultural practices involving joint endeavors. And so I followed the process and rationale of initiating contractual agreements between a Canadian high tech firm and a similar firm in S. Korea.

I discovered that Koreans place far more importance in assessing the “character” of their negotiating “opposites.” Thus is done through hosting parties and social events, during which time they assess their counterpart’s character. In addition, even after signing a contract, they regard it as a “starting point”; a basis on which changes can be made rather than a “done deal”. Note the role of empathy and intuition that comes into play here.

This, I think, is what Jesus is referring to in his response to Thomas and Philip. Start from the assumption that my teachings are true, and test them by your actions that follow.

Two questions seem to remain constant: How do we form and maintain a covenant under conditions of change”? How do we form a covenant with those who see things differently than we do; to maintain respect for the dignity of each person, their culture and their convictions – J.H. Yoder)

Perhaps we need to first find common ground of understanding—not through using a rational formula but through a) heightening our own powers of empathy and b) engaging in activities that encourage our sense of oneness with the other and finally c) by recognizing that this is a never ending, ongoing process

This, after all, is what the Gospel of Love is about.

There is a choir in Turkey, near the Syrian border. It is made up of Muslim, Jewish and Christian singers. Their music often contains strains of each of their hymns combined into one song. One can imagine a feeling of unity; of oneness; an implicit covenant among the choir members that emerges from that joint endeavor.

Perhaps there is a lesson here for all of us.