PROMISES
(John 15:1-17)

RETREAT SESSION 1  Friday Evening

PROMISES FROM GOD

PRAYER

O Thou who art eternal, mysterious, present, sentient, mighty, caring – beyond all our powers to perceive or understand it – we come in our finite brains and bodies, in our humanity, in our confusion and hope and loneliness and eagerness, both dreading and hoping for contact with YOU. Yet by Thy mercy, we also come with a confidence we would not dare to presume, except by faith in Jesus the Christ.

But thus encouraged, we lift our shy souls and hearts to Thee. You really do care? All this mayhem has a purpose? It is okay, in fact necessary, to learn and seek, to work and play, to throw ourselves into all the LIFE You make available?

We come to praise You for the gift of Life. We come also to acknowledge our dependence and our thankfulness. We come hoping for clearer contact between us and You – wanting to know You; wanting further light on what this Life You have given us is for and about; wanting to know what our own part in it is.

Great Spirit, come close again in this hour, we pray, that we may not be so far from Thee tomorrow. In the name of Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

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PROMISES, PROMISES

“Never make deals with God.” How many times I have heard this comment declared with certainty and conviction. How do such blunders get started among us, and what authority makes us believe them? I understand; prayer is not for leverage or for trying to bribe or beg God to do what we want or get what we want. But that is only the lowest form of “deal.” If we do not make deals with God, we are not
even in the game. Covenants and promises and partnership – getting deeply and truly involved with each other, and having plans and purposes and projects together – are at the core of the story everywhere we turn in Scripture. Why are prayer and the relationship between us and God so vapid and colorless for so many people? How is it possible to make prayer seem stale and dry? It is only when we arrange it so that there is nothing at stake. When we stop making deals – when there is nothing at stake – then our religion goes stale and dry. If we build a bridge and then are afraid to put any weight on it, what’s the purpose? Are our prayers a bridge that we never dare to drive over or walk over?

The following is a note from my own past, not very long ago; it comes from my personal prayer journal, dated November 25, 2014:

Okay, Lord, Community Church in Corona del Mar is a far-out possibility. I don’t know for sure yet, but it seems to me that YOU are the reason I didn’t shut down the “probe” instantly. If that is so, if YOU are thinking some good might come of sending me back there, then I have to tell you, I am already finding myself excited and eager. So if YOU inspire and guide their side to call me there, I will get my side ready to go.

That is only for openers, I know. If I go there, YOU will have to help me lots, and constantly. There are scars and wounds and issues under the surface. I can feel some of it, but don’t understand. But if we can get beyond our personal agendas, there are some true possibilities. I am suspecting that this can be a model (whether anybody notices or not) for a church that sees the uniqueness of Jesus in wider and clearer perspective than almost anywhere in our time. Will YOU help me to rethink everything as if Jesus really is the true and incredible Messiah/Incarnation? Only minus the Virgin Birth, and the Second Coming, and the Creeds that obscure by explaining the unexplainable: minus all the negative fears and images we have tacked on over the centuries? And can we become a “twin-sister church” that helps and supports each other through struggles and challenges that discourage and stop most churches? And maybe, with YOUR help, we can even figure out why so many churches are going down and disappearing today, and find some ways to reverse that pattern.
The theme of this Retreat is PROMISES. Why do I think promises are important enough for us to spend a whole retreat on them? Well, promises are at the core of everything we call HOPE. Promises are involved in every covenant we have ever heard about or considered. That goes all the way from taking a new job to getting married to catching any glimmer of the drama going on between us and God – from Abraham down to the present day.

Only, like with all our significant words, PROMISES is a bigger concept than we usually realize. It is full of meaning and destiny and possibilities that take our breath away. Nobody is ever depressed when they are living in the expectation that some promises they care about might be fulfilled. Nobody commits suicide unless they have concluded that all the promises are false. On the other hand, the concept of PROMISES is full of danger and booby traps and false or careless assumptions.

Just for openers, not all the promises in the Bible are from God. Sometimes humans tell us about promises they say God has made, but they have no notion of what they are talking about. Sifting through the false promises to the true promises is a huge issue, and humans often disagree about which are which, and even fight about it. Whole denominations quarrel and split over what God has promised and how to move toward their fulfillment.

“Not a word of the Lord’s promises to the house of Israel went unfulfilled; they all came true.” (Joshua 21:45) When was this written? For how long was this true? It certainly is not historically accurate for the last three thousand years. “You know in your heart of hearts, all of you, that nothing the Lord your God promised you has failed to come true, not one word of it.” (Joshua 23:14) When was this written? For how long was this true? It certainly is not historically accurate for the last three thousand years. Joshua is not kidding, but he is blatantly and all-out mistaken. We could argue that on the day Joshua makes these claims, they are true from a certain perspective. He is trying to encourage the Israelites to be faithful and to keep their covenant with God. He is about to die and leave them to go on into their destiny in the Promised Land. And the promise he mentions is full of threats if they do not keep the covenant, which among other things sounds cruel and despicable to us. That is, Joshua assumes it is the will of God for the people of Israel to be exclusive; to kill or drive out most of their neighbors; to be careful never to intermarry (unless with those who are complete converts to Judaism). Moving into the Promised Land has not been nearly as successful as is being pretended. Much
of the land will not belong to or be controlled by Israel for another three hundred years or so. And once they are established in the Promised Land, it will only last about eighty years. After that, despite all the promises, it will be strife, confusion, defeat, moments of hope followed by generations of despair – clear down to the present time.

I am simply saying that God’s promises are often conditional, false (that is, tainted with human error), misunderstood, or garbled in such a way that trusting them is ludicrous. Today both Israel and Islam believe that God has promised them full and exclusive rights to possess the land and live in Palestine/Israel. Despite the reasonable suggestions of liberals from any camp, nothing is ever solved – nothing stays improved. Liberals are trying to come up with compromises that would allow everybody to live in peace. But it doesn’t work because that is not the real issue. If Muslims allow Jews to live in this region, it is to admit that Allah has lied to them, that Allah’s promise is false, that their faith is in vain. Some Jews would be glad to reach a compromise if it would result in peaceful cohabitation. But no orthodox Jew would ever agree. It would mean that Yahweh is false and that the promises they have believed in for four thousand years are mistaken.

I am wanting us to realize that the concept of PROMISES is potentially treacherous. If you believe you have found an authentic promise from the true God, you will base and risk your life on it. It will guide, inspire, and empower you through all your days. But if you have misunderstood the promise or if the promise is false, the end of the affair will be devastating. God’s promises to Abraham have been mostly devastating.

The only way to make sense out of it – at least as far as the prophets of Israel are concerned – is to admit that the Jewish people keep breaking the Covenant and therefore they deserve all the punishment they have been getting for all these generations. This is not from the detractors of Judaism, but from their own top prophets.

But has Israel been less faithful or less obedient than all the other nations around them? It is the question behind the Book of Job. Of course, Israel and Judaism still exist. What other nations – or their gods – have survived for four thousand years?

All along the way, and certainly today, some are saying that the simplest explanation is to admit that there is no God – and therefore there are no promises. I am wanting us to realize that the concept of PROMISES is potentially treacherous.
Some of the most important promises in life are never stated outright or in so many words. Perhaps because words cannot contain them. This is not only true of God’s promises (back to that in a minute). It is also true of the promises which come from our friends or our relatives or a true mate. “I love you,” unless it is meaningless or hiding ulterior motives, always comes with promises. Of course, the word “love” is a very nebulous and imprecise word in our culture and society.

Is Mariana the most important human being in my life? That is, if forced into a list of priorities, would she come higher than and above all other humans in my life? She doesn’t always know it, believe it, or realize it. If she devises various ways to test this out, I frequently flunk them on purpose. That kind of “love on demand” would not be helpful or healthy for either one of us. But it is nevertheless obvious to me that Mariana is the most important human being in my life. I don’t try to design or plan this. I don’t try to work to make it true. It has been “handed to me” – one of the top gifts of my life. Now, if I went on to say that we never disagree, that she is always nice to me, that we never have days or times or moments when we are exceedingly annoyed with each other or feeling unloved and treated unfairly, you would know I had gone back into Fantasyland. In the early days of our marriage (the first forty years or so), I was not always sure which side of the reality was true: the love part or the squabble part. But after a while it got obvious, until even in the midst of quarrels and hurt feelings, I know the love far outweighs the misunderstandings and the miscommunications. It even outweighs the imperfections that we both still carry into the relationship.

Does God love you? No piece of paper can prove it to us. “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” That seems to be sufficient for many people. It never impressed me much, even as a little boy. People could sing it without meaning it or feeling it. A few of them, from my perspective, did mean it and feel it, but it was not the song that was doing it. They already believed it, and the song was only punctuating what had become real and true for them.

What are the promises of God? Rainbows are beautiful, especially double-rainbows across a dark plain with mountains in the background. But I never believed that God flooded the world in the first place. Natural disasters may be part of the design, but I don’t think God’s personal animosity is the explanation. Luther was terrified when caught in a huge lightning-and-thunder storm. It was
an integral part of his first conversion. It took him years to get past the repercussions of that experience, which he misinterpreted in the first place. So did God “use” his ignorance and superstition for a good purpose? Satan is the Father of Lies. If we truly trust God more and more, it is because we become convinced that God is not a trickster or con artist or playing games in order to control us. In any case, a promise that God would never flood the world again lacks significance for me. I can make a rainbow with a sprinkler on a summer day. If that is the depth and level of my faith, no wonder the church is such a travesty of what a true faith community could be like in our world.

Some of you have become annoyed at my insistence that God grants us free will; that God does not change the rules at whim; that God does not work by miracles but by design; and that God, no matter how much power God has, is so consistently and incredibly disciplined that God never (never ever) changes the consequences of the rules and principles of creation to play favorites or to condemn us or help us. But what some of you never hear beyond this is that God does have purpose and design for all of us and for each of us; that God is sentient and intelligent beyond all our abilities to grasp or imagine it; and that God has INFLUENCE – enormous and constant influence. This influence is operative (operational) to exactly and precisely the degree that we are willing to allow it and cooperate with it. In other words, when we are reconciled to God – when we trust God – it no longer breaks free will for God to help us, guide us, empower us, inspire us.

That does not solve all our problems. And it causes some of our biggest problems because we live in a world alienated from God. We do not forget Jesus or what Jesus taught us, showed us, and did for us. Nevertheless, God’s influence never leads us into defeat or failure or disaster – unless the redemptive purposes are so ripe (so potentially full of promise) that we ourselves would want to risk the danger and damage because of the goal. By the way, our soul – our spiritual nature – carries many of the marks of our Designer, thus giving us awareness and goals and purposes that, when awakened, want to cooperate with our Creator even more than we want the kudos of this world.

What are the promises of God? If you do not find them for yourself, you cannot truly trust them. And a promise we do not trust is a greater detriment than no promise at all. If a person seems really appealing and wonderful to you and they say they love you but you do not trust it, that is truly a curse.
Does God love Abraham? Does God love Israel? The record is fascinating. Clearly many of the players involved end up convinced that God does care about them and that God is using influence to shape and guide them. They become convinced that God does indeed make promises to them, and they make some promises back to God. And their history is unintelligible if we take it out of this context entirely. But it also becomes clear fairly quickly, at least to some of us, that the records are corrupted by the human need to be absolutely certain about some things that are not absolutely certain. A fairly significant amount of religious propaganda is dedicated to the purpose of making us all believe absolutely, without admitting that we live in a world where absolutes are neither appropriate nor possible.

This does not erase the possibility of our trusting in God, despite all claims to the contrary. Every honest commitment and promise in life is a gamble, a risk. Fifty-nine years ago I wanted to believe that Mariana loved me. My whole life as I have known it depended upon whether or not, and to what degree, I would trust this possibility. It was never an absolute, steady-state, obvious fact. Sometimes it seemed probable. Sometimes it seemed highly questionable. Sometimes it seemed all mixed up with so many needs, demands, and responsibilities we were both trying to keep up with, and confusion and weariness were the reality more than clarity or conviction. But looking back now, it is clear to me that Mariana has loved me far more than I could possibly have imagined or believed back when I wanted to know so desperately. “They said we were too young to know.” And they were absolutely right. We always are. But if we want to experience LIFE, that is not what really matters. You put in your personal commitment and you take your chances. You make a lot of mistakes. And maybe you forgive each other and keep on giving what you have to give. There are principles and patterns that operate with every relationship. This includes our relationship with God. And clearly this is the most important relationship of all. But it unfolds according to the same principles and patterns of every other relationship we have ever known.

Do we trust God? There is no relationship without trust. Do you think God cares about you? Do you think God has made any promises to you? Apart from such things, nothing matters. What the preacher said; what you read in a book; what impressed you about the experience a good friend told you about – it can awaken the possibilities perhaps. But when it comes your turn to bet your life (or not), you have to go quiet, journey inward, take a fresh look at what you know about yourself and what you really care about.
Sometimes when we get desperate enough or stay quiet long enough, we begin to hear the whispers of God’s real promises. That does not solve everything. It opens the opportunity – the possibility – that there are dimensions to Life beyond our ordinary perceptions, that we can explore them if we are willing, and that the Holy Spirit will be with us on the journey.

So that is my introduction to the Quiet Time that now follows. We are not all focused on the same promises at the same time. At different times in our lives, different promises come front and center. It doesn’t matter, really, what promises of God I trust. What matters is what promises of God you trust. Nevertheless, it seems fair to mention just a few of the promises I love most at the moment. By the way, while I often connect a promise with a Scripture passage, it takes more than a Scripture passage to get me to trust it. We are also people of prayer. When our prayers, a passage in Scripture, and our experience so far all coincide, then we begin to truly trust.

1.) *I am the vine; you are the branches. If you stay on the vine, you will bear much fruit.* (John 15:1-12) Most days I have a hard time believing that. But I really do trust it.

2.) *In the world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.* (John 16:33) (I do love this one.)

3.) *Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs.* (Matthew 5:3)

4.) *The Son of God, Christ Jesus, proclaimed among you by us, was not a mixture of YES and NO. With him it is always YES; for all the promises of God have their YES in him. That is why, when we give glory to God, it is through Christ Jesus that we say “Amen.”* (II Corinthians 1:19-20)

5.) *I will be with you always, to the end of time.* (Matthew 28:20)
QUESTIONS FOR THE QUIET (Session 1)

It is easy to find extensive lists of biblical promises. It is also easy to get lost in the woods if we try to pay attention to every tree. And then the squabbles begin. Every time a human makes a promise in God’s name, is that one of God’s promises? Not everybody sucking up to the king was a good prophet. Traditions about the land God had promised to Abraham (and his descendants) have not proved to be true in world history so far. And so it goes. If all truth is not immediately obvious, some people want to discount it all and go elsewhere. But trusting God and staying faithful is not an easy Path, or far more people would be on it.

Spend some time calling to mind the promises from God you do know and that you trust are from God. Never mind what you do not know (there is always more). What comes to mind that you do know, have experience with, and do trust? (We are not the Christian Fact. We are the Christian Faith (Trust). All meaning is subjective.) Nobody ever made a promise to anyone – God included – without risk and hope being involved.

1.) What promises from God do you trust the most and build your life around?

2.) What makes you most “nervous” (what is most scary, uncertain) about trusting these promises?

3.) Are you willing yet to claim any of these promises with greater courage, more clarity, more joyful abandon than ever before?
RETREAT SESSION 2  Saturday Morning

PROMISES TO GOD

PRAYER

Thou Holy One:

YOU who wait and watch in this very moment and in all of our moments – while our minds click through their tiny cycles of fear and faith, of doubt and desire; while our hearts beat time to our trust and mistrust, sometimes with passion, sometimes in despair ...

YOU who art THOU, the Creator, the unknown, the all-knowing, the eternal ...

YOU who came down! Down all the speechless corridors of eternity and time and space; down to the dust and blood and strife; down to us, that we might know Thee ...

YOU, Eternal Christ, who came to fulfill Thy Resurrection – fulfill it still, even in us; in hope and faith; in our surrender to Thy Love; in our realization of Thy Kingdom, here in our midst, yet ever coming ...

Teach us the WAY of Life that runs by faith and gratitude and love. In awareness of Your incredible grace, we pray. Amen.

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Last night’s questions were difficult. What are the promises of God to me personally? And which of God’s promises do I really trust personally, and trust enough to build my life around – bet my life on?

As usual, the generic and the general only sidetrack our religion. If you believe all the promises – that is, try to pay attention to all of them – in effect you believe none of them. At least not enough to let them guide and change your life.

Many of you will need to return to last night’s questions and keep praying with them until more clarity is revealed. But now we need to move from God’ promises to us – to our promises to God.

The first question you will run into in the following Quiet Time is this: “What are the biggest (most daring) promises you have ever made to God.” It is both true and appropriate that we tend to be more focused on the promises God is making to us, or that we at least hope God is making to us. Any promises we make to God seem paltry and
insignificant in comparison. At the same time, within the arena in which we live, our promises to God are huge indeed. A genuine promise to God shapes and forms our lives. People who don’t think so have either never made a real promise to God or they have not tried to keep it with any devotion or consistency.

“Jacob made this vow [vow = promise]: ‘If God will be with me, if he will protect me on my journey and give me food to eat and clothes to wear, so that I come back safely to my father’s house, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone which I have set up as a sacred pillar shall be a house of God [dwelling place of God = shrine]. And of all that Thou givest to me, I shall give a tenth to Thee.’” (Genesis 28:20-22)

Is it a coincidence that from this “new beginning” came “Israel” (Jacob’s new name), and from this came the twelve sons of Jacob, and thus the twelve tribes of Israel and the whole history of the Old Testament? This promise is what turned Jacob’s vague awareness of an important grandfather (Abraham) into his own dramatic partnership with God. Relationships without a covenant are just for our amusement. They carry no weight. They have no lasting meaning.

Have you ever thought much about the impact of Jacob’s story on Jesus (twelve tribes to twelve apostles)? Or Jacob’s difficult relations with Laban and Esau, and Jesus’ difficult relations with His mother and brothers? Or Jacob’s ladder in comparison to Jesus’ baptism? Or Jacob wrestling all night with the angel, and Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane?

I make no claim for a total parallel. But if we are familiar enough with our heritage and its stories, the patterns in Jacob’s story and in Jesus’ story remind us of them both more and more. One of the reasons “it is necessary for us as Christians to study some portion of the Scriptures each day” is that in time our familiarity with our script makes us more and more aware of the patterns that connect our lives to the lives of those who have gone before us. If there are connections between Jacob and Jesus, there are also connections between Jacob and Jesus and us – that is, if we are on the Path: if we have dedicated our own lives to God and have also made covenant promises to God.

I have decided to retell a story many of you have heard already. There are other illustrations, but this one is huge for me. This experience changed my life in many ways. Up to this point in my life, I thought being religious was mostly about how hard I was trying to be useful to God. I had no idea that this was completely impossible
unless I was also letting the Holy Spirit shape and form all my efforts and promises at every step along the way. This is huge and obvious, but I had missed it. All along the way, I notice many others miss it too.

So I had gone into the Ministry because of a dramatic spiritual encounter years earlier. In the aftermath of that wake-up call, I had (to the surprise of most people who knew me back then) graduated from high school, graduated from college, gone off to seminary, been called to be the Minister of my first church, and been ordained in the Congregational Christian Church. That means I had taken ordination vows. In other words, I had made some specific promises to God. That was a serious matter as far as I was concerned.

About two and a half years into my first parish (Paxton, Massachusetts), I wanted out. I had done and was doing everything I knew or could think of to become a faithful and effective Christian Minister. But now I wanted nothing more to do with it. The church was a joke. There were some wonderful people in that church, but as institution and organization it had no intention whatsoever of following Jesus or of living for His Kingdom. There was nothing some people couldn’t think of a reason to be against. There was no spiritual discipline or effort so small that it wasn’t too big and demanding for some of them to try. As far as I could tell, we were not doing anything significant for Jesus or His Kingdom, and it seemed clear to me that we had no intention of ever doing so.

So I went into the New England woods to pray. “Lord,” I said, “I have taken ordination vows, and I cannot go back on them without Your permission. But there is no way I can believe You intend me to spend my life this way. This is not accomplishing anything, and we could do what we are doing for a thousand years and there would be no benefit to Your Kingdom worth mentioning. I want out. I need to leave the Ministry and find some authentic way to serve You.”

There was silence. Then the thoughts started forming in my brain – which is what I mean by the Spirit being in dialogue with us. And the Voice said: “Why don’t you try it my way?” I had been quite upset to begin with, but this made me really angry. I informed the Voice in no uncertain terms that I had done everything I possibly could to be a kind, loving, caring, faithful Pastor. I had worked to convince and persuade and keep everybody happy, and I had done so with diligence and patience and forgiveness. I had preached and taught and visited until Mariana hardly ever saw me. So I explained
things to this obviously clueless Voice. Another silence. Then the thoughts formed again: “Why don’t you try it MY Way?”

We went around a number of times. I could not understand because I thought I was doing it His way. I was doing what I thought was “His Way” according to my understanding of what “His Way” was supposed to be like. Finally, in exasperation, I said: “Okay, what is Your WAY?” I knew I had him, since prayers are never very practical or specific; just us talking to ourselves mostly, you know. But instantly there dropped into my head a whole list of things I was doing that I needed to stop doing, and another list of things I was not doing that I should start doing. Some of them I had already even tried, but they had met with so much opposition and resistance that I had dropped them.

I was stunned. Finally I muttered: “If I did half of what you just said, I wouldn’t last here two weeks.” The Voice shot back: “I thought you wanted out!”

I did not think that was very nice, but I could not think of a good reply. We hassled for a while and finally came up with a deal. I would try it “His Way” to the best of my ability for six months. If at the end of that time I had been fired or if I still wanted out, then He would release me from my ordination vows – no hard feelings.

So I went out of those woods in fear and trembling – and believe me, the fur flew! But to my utter amazement, lots of people started responding with gratitude, excitement, support, enthusiasm. I had not realized how many people were hungry for God but did not know what to do about it. The opposition was entrenched and they owned a lot of votes, but they could not keep up with the Spirit. The Spirit kept raiding their camp and bringing new support from places we would never have expected. It was a whole new world: lives were changing, love-bonds were forming, and people were getting healed. I have never been fired and I never again asked to quit – though once, some years later, I thought it was over, for very different reasons. Nevertheless, for over fifty-five years it has always been that way in every church I have tried to serve. It is always a fight. Satan always wants the church to be meaningless and ineffective. And there are always people who think any controversy is automatically unChristian, so all Satan has to do is play that card and he wins: if anybody is unhappy, stop everything. But instead of that, we need to watch Jesus – and His prayer life – and then follow Him into our own prayer life. Then LIFE gets wonderful, though sometimes also really hard.
Do we ever make a promise we don’t wish we could break, somewhere along the way? Should we not know this and expect this? Patient endurance is an integral part of our WAY.

If we make no promises to God, what does that say about our relationship with God? But as we all know, making promises (in a temporal and broken world) is scary business. How do we “do that” – go about that – so that there is no question on our side that we have made the promise? We go into the Presence, so to speak, and say the vow, the oath, the promise in language as clear and plain as we know how to make it. And we keep a record. Is there timing attached to it? Are there phases or steps involved? Do we need God’s help, even to keep the promises we make to God? Every single time! But does that weaken or excuse our intentions in any way? If we fail to keep this promise, we know it will take a huge repentance/forgiveness affair to restore the relationship. BUT it is also now true that God can work with us – we are “in it” together.

Below are the most important areas for us to consider when we are contemplating promises. (Not world peace or world hunger or orphans in Africa, etc. Maybe you get tired of hearing me say that. Well, I get tired of listening to all the people who don’t seem to know how much they are avoiding a true relationship with God by getting sidetracked into efforts that are neither personal nor truly calling them to risk anything that really matters.)

- Are you making promises to God that make a difference in your own personal life? (In what you are trying to be, become, accomplish – what you are living for?)

- Are you making promises to God that make a difference in the life of your family?

- Are you making promises to God that make a difference in your life at work? (In how you work, where you work, or what you are working for?)

- Are you making promises to God that make a difference in how you spend your spare time? (Not talking about not having any spare time. But how do you decide how to spend it, what enhances it, and what makes it truly exciting and meaningful to you?)

“I am the Way.” What, Jesus has something to do with the Christian Way or Path? My hunch is that if we follow Jesus into all the most important places of our lives, He will transform everything. But we have to be willing to stick our necks out: to make promises – to allow the transformation. And we all know that we have a tendency to want to keep control over the important places of our lives. We want the journey to be safe.

Why is Disneyland so popular? People can go to Disneyland and pay a little money to have an adventure that is ninety-nine percent guaranteed to be safe. At the end of the day, they will come back to the same car they got out of that morning and take up their lives almost exactly where they left them off before the adventure began. Nothing important or lasting will have happened. It is a counterfeit adventure – a charade.

Lots of people used to go to church in the same manner – with the same expectation. They are looking for a Jesus who will never make a significant difference in their lives. And Jesus will put up with the charade for as long as any of us are content to leave things at that level.
QUESTIONS FOR THE QUIET (Session 2)

1.) What are the biggest (most daring) promises you have ever made to God in the past?

Did anything good come from them? Did they get you into any trouble? Do you wish you had never made them?

2.) When you probe the quiet in the Spirit’s presence, do you get thoughts or hints of promises you need to make now? (Often our partnership with God cannot move forward unless we make new promises.)

3.) Most of us do not have perfect records with the promises we have made to God. But our God is a God of grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Are there promises from your past that are in disarray?

Do any of them need to be dusted off and reactivated?

Do some of them need to be let go – that is, claim the grace and accept the forgiveness and move on?
CONNECTION IS COVENANT

PRAYER

Apart from Thee, O God, there is nothing. Apart from Thee, life ends before it is begun. Apart from Thee, love is an empty hope, and all our endeavors sink back into nothingness. Sometimes it feels like we live apart from Thee. And we begin to feel like nothing. Nothing matters. There is nothing to do. Or rather, whatever we do means nothing.

With You, Lord, there is everything: No end to the possibilities. Life is full of new beginnings and second chances. Love is an endless surprise. Every path leads to new truth. Every task shows us another part of Your Kingdom. We begin to realize we really are important, because You made us. And those around us are really something too. There is so much to do, and everything we do brings some new delight.

Your coming to be with us – that is some favor, Lord. What a difference! Do You mind if we say THANK YOU? We keep trying to do that, in the strange ways of our kind. If we don’t do it very well, even if it seems silly to You, we know You will read the intentions of our hearts. Help us, we pray, to declare the thankfulness of our hearts by the way we live in Your presence.

Through Jesus the Christ, our Savior, we pray. Amen.

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“Late that same day, the first day of the week, when the disciples were together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them. ‘Peace be with you!’ he said; then he showed them his hands and his side. On seeing the Lord, the disciples were overjoyed. Jesus said again, ‘Peace be with you! As the Father sent me, so I send you.’ Then he breathed on them, saying, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit! If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you pronounce them unforgiven, unforgiven they remain.’” (John 20:19-23)

May I mention my newest scriptural breakthrough? For years it has seemed weird to me that Jesus would be limiting heavenly realities to the very dubious spiritual awareness and perception of His earthly followers. What the ecclesia does not forgive remains unforgiven? Yuck!
Suddenly, just a few days ago (in the aftermath of “The New Ecclesia” sermon) I saw it the other way around. We were talking about the huge emphasis Jesus puts on forgiveness and on the damage that comes from our broken relationships, and how it is imperative, if we are His People, to keep healing our relationships.

Then Jesus sums it up: if we do not forgive, it does not get healed; it remains unforgiven – in this realm and the next.

Of course! How could it be otherwise? Nothing in the Kingdom is by rote or automatic or overriding our free will. When it comes to spiritual principles, the reality there is the same as the reality here. What we do not or will not heal does not get healed!

But suddenly I am too dense to track it? Or I want Jesus to take care of it – to fix it – because I don’t want to have to deal with it or be bothered with it? Oh shit! Not again. Trapped in my own reality one more time. If I will not trust Him enough to learn and grow, I do not get to learn or grow. “Unforgiven they remain.”

Ah yes, but if I have not forgiven because there is no repentance – that is, because no authentic healing, and therefore no authentic relationship, is possible – then I am not required to pretend or to side with evil, even in the next realm. It will be authentic, or we will wait some more. Sing Hallelujah!

One more time: Christianity is not general or universal; it is personal and relational. Politicians make universal promises. Such promises are never kept, and cannot be; the world does not work that way. A promise that is not personal is merely propaganda. But if there are no promises in your life – promises that you trust – there is no HOPE or purpose in your life either. We live for and we live by the promises that we believe in.

And of course, that opens us up to the shadow – the Dark Side. If a promise that we trust and that we think has been made to us is broken, we know ourselves betrayed. Unless we never put much weight on that promise in the first place – that is, never trusted it much or cared about it very much – then this betrayal tends to undo our HOPE and our purpose. It leads us into depression or despair, or anger, or one of the many forms of negativity that begin to unravel our lives. If we cannot find some way to recover from true betrayal, we get drawn into the Dark Side and serve it more and more.
So we must see it and know it: If promises are not kept, the covenant is broken. Our world is full of stories of the times and ways wherein we broke various covenants with God and then turned against God because of the consequences that followed our own betrayal.

Promises can be made from only one side of a relationship, but that is a very one-sided relationship (duh). On the other hand, despite our mythical theories, relationships are nearly always lopsided at any given moment. Between me and Mariana, sometimes she is giving more; sometimes I am giving more. Sometimes we are both convinced that we are the one caring and giving the most.

I am a father (mothers can speak for themselves.) It is entirely appropriate that I make more promises to my children than they make to me. If I do not keep the promises I make to my children, that blights their lives. It makes it very difficult for them to trust relationships in the future.

God is, of course, off-the-charts superior to me in every way. It is entirely appropriate that God makes more and bigger promises to me than I can make to God. And it is exceedingly important (transformative) for me to accept and trust those promises, or I turn away from the relationship that is possible between us. But if I do not respond with some promises of my own, the relationship is put on hold. It may not be God’s intention. It may not be my conscious intention. It is just what happens. The principles of relationship, like the law of gravity, operate whether I like it or not.

Can any of us imagine a marriage where there are no promises? Can any of us imagine wanting to be in a marriage where there are no promises? How baneful and boring such a relationship would be. And how sad, to take the most dramatic and compelling of all relationships on earth and turn it into a cohabitation so lusterless and so lacking in eagerness or expectation that two people who used to long with all of their beings for a chance to be together have grown so stale and unimaginative that the thought of being together no longer raises even a twinge of excitement or delight.

Can you imagine someone being in love who does not want to make any promises? Or anyone being in love who does not want to receive any promises from their beloved? And yet we do sometimes encounter a person whose relationship with God is so trite, so shallow, so full of non-expectation that their pulse never speeds up and their eyes never light up at the thought of spending time in the presence of their beloved.
Only in the church do we find people trying to fashion a loveless covenant without joy or risk or passion – without any excitement beyond what they have always known and taken for granted. You say there are rumors that the church is dying? Could that possibly be happening to a more deserving people? Things that have no life in them are certain to die. Jesus said, “Let the dead bury their dead.” (Matthew 8:22) Have we ever wondered why He said that, or what He really meant?

On the other hand, when people on both sides of a relationship make promises and mean to keep them, then we get a “covenant.” We also get dynamism and eager expectation and things coming to LIFE. “Covenant” is one of the biggest words in our language. Most of what matters about the Judeo-Christian experience (religion, heritage, story) takes place in the context of a covenant of one kind or another. And some of us are convinced that we are seeing and being invited into a New Covenant – the most exciting and far-reaching covenant the world has ever known.

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt – the covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 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 upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach their neighbor or their brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31-34, written six hundred years before Jesus came.)

Is this not the prelude to the coming of the Holy Spirit? Maybe some of us still do not hear it. But Jesus heard it, knew it, and remembered: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. This do as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” (We will get to that again tomorrow.)

Our WAY of Life is born in promises and surrounded by promises. But love-bonds are always a relationship – and always, in true love, we respond to promises with promises of our own. That is how it works – when we work it.
QUESTIONS FOR THE QUIET (Session 3)

1.) Do you connect any of your own story (history and experience) in the context of a covenant between you and God? That is, are you aware of ways in which God’s promises to you and your promises to God connect?

2.) Some covenants are personal in the sense of being (at least on the conscious level) between you and God. Some covenants are bigger and involve a larger “faith community.” Are you aware of any covenant you participate in where promises between you and God are clear and real, yet some kind of “Christian community” is also involved in the same covenant?

3.) When a covenant exists in the consciousness of a larger group of people, it is powerful but far more difficult at the same time (e.g., Torah for the Jewish community). What if some of the people of the group do not keep their promises? The entire Judeo-Christian history is an example of both the glory and the devastation of such principles at work – the full spectrum of love-bonds at one end and betrayal at the other.

Are you aware of a covenant you share with a “church” you are part of at the present time?

What are the promises you make in this covenant?

How do you deal with the “jaded” scars you carry from being part of past faith communities where some of the members did not have as much intentionality (faithfulness) as you were expecting and putting into the community?

4.) Are you ready or willing to try any new promises to your current “church” (ecclesia)?
RETREAT SHORT SESSION

WRITING COVENANTS FOR 2016

An oath, a vow, a promise. From us.

What is the most daring and dangerous thing you have ever done for Jesus?

Is it in response to the most daring and dangerous thing Jesus has ever done for you?

For reflection:

The promise of Everlasting Life. (I Corinthians 15)

Where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:3)

There are many dwelling-places in my Father’s house. (John 14:2)

I will be with you always, to the end of .... (Matthew 28:20)

If you have time: Rough-draft or complete your Covenant for 2016.

Perhaps it is a Covenant just between you and God.

It may be a Covenant to/with Countryside Community Church, though they may never see it (only its results).

It may be a Covenant to/with The New Church.

It may be a Covenant to/with Community Church, Congregational of Corona del Mar.

Some of you write Covenants to more than one church. It’s nice to be free to follow the Spirit’s leading.
I thank God that we get to take communion together today. I always need it, and sometimes I even know how much I need it. Sometimes our awareness of our need is greater than at other times. I happen to know that some of you particularly need communion today as well.

Before we get to our meal, let us come together in our usual fashion, to focus on our story – on the power and love of the Christ who is our source and meaning and purpose. To gather our scattered lives and thoughts and anxieties and confusion, I know of no better passage than this one from the fifteenth chapter of John’s Gospel: “I am the vine, my Father is the gardener ... you are the branches.” If together we do not produce grapes (fruit), there will not be any communion, at least not for us. The blood of Christ starts it, makes it possible – a thing beyond our power to produce. But we receive and respond: “Love one another, as I have loved you.” Is this not the prelude to the coming of the Holy Spirit? Maybe some of us still do not hear it.

We need to let the image of the vine sink in again. Let the image have room in your mind. It can fill all the room you can give it. It is an image of the true church – the invisible church – of which our physical institutions are merely shadows: our sincere but feeble attempts to be the “church,” the ecclesia, the people of God. The Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ is “like” a great vine with its vast trunk system encircling and crisscrossing the earth in every direction. Only gently, subtly, just barely out of sight. It carries nourishment for the soul to all parts of the globe – love, spiritual peace, beauty, truth, courage, hope, endurance, forgiveness, power. And we are all “like” branches attached to the great vine, able to draw from the source of all power and LIFE.

It is the truth about how it really is with the realm of the Spirit. Of course, we could get hung up on the details of the imagery. A vine and branches – that is not it. Jesus only says, for lack of better words in our poor language, that the spiritual realm is something like this – an analogy. So we have to leap and go with the image. It is a spiritual vine. It is not limited by space or time. It is real, but not in a physical way. It is available, but not coercive. If people prefer, they
can go on about their business without any acknowledgment that the
vine is really there – with no appreciation or awareness that whatever
sustenance they are getting is coming from this vine.

The detriment, however, is that the flow of nourishment between
the vine and its branches depends upon this appreciation and
awareness. That may not be totally true; it may not be an absolute
principle. But by our awareness and gratitude we limit or expand the
amount of flow between us and the vine. We do not like to think of it
in such terms; we do not like to think that some of our spiritual
shortages are our own fault. Nevertheless, if the spiritual energy gets
low or begins to dry up, it is because we forget to drink or we refuse
to drink from the vine. It is also wonderful to know this, of course,
because then if our spirits begin to dry up, we know what to do
about it: open up again, get close again, drink again from the vine!

THE VINE is the Life Force: the power, the nurture, true security,
sustenance (in but not of this world). In Christian language, the Holy
Spirit of Jesus the Christ is the Life Force. We are THE BRANCHES:
reaching out, growing, exploring, learning – connectors between this
spiritual power and the outer world. A branch does not die instantly
when cut off from the vine. It may think it is just fine for quite a little
while. But cut off, inevitably the sap begins to dry up. The branch
apart, by itself, loses connection – meaning, it becomes increasingly
brittle, bitter. It stops growing, expanding. Cut off, it begins to think
and experience more and more about less and less, until it is only of
self and unto itself.

Now, if Jesus had been trying to be a popular preacher or
teacher, He would have kept this parable shorter and simpler.
But NO, Jesus never leaves “well enough” alone – at least not what
we think of as “well enough.” So here comes the Gardener. There is
always a Gardener in Jesus’ stories, one way or another. Well, there
is always God. This time, God is the Gardener.

Sometimes the Gardener plants; sometimes the Gardener
cultivates; sometimes the Gardener irrigates or spreads plant food
(see, I’m getting better). The Gardener does many, many things. In
this particular parable, the Gardener is pruning. Clip, clip. Snip, snip.
Some of the branches are saying, “Oh, thank you!” But many of the
branches are saying, “Ouch! Don’t you know how much that hurts!
I hate you.”
Some branches are saying “thank you” because they are tired of carrying the deadweight of past mistakes and old efforts that never produced anything and never will. They are glad to stop pouring energy into offshoots (some people call them “suckers”) that are never going to bear any fruit. It is wonderful when the Gardener clears out all the tangle and gets rid of all the false goals we “sucker” into. Then we can get on with the real business of Life and spiritual growth.

Why do some branches say “Ouch! I hate you”? It doesn’t make much sense, but I’ve said it often enough myself to know why. Sometimes we forget that it takes grapes to make communion. We start thinking that we are here to acquire things – anything and everything. We forget that we are here to produce fruit. Whenever we get in that frame of mind, we deeply resent the Gardener.

The truth still is that any branch or twig that stops drinking in the nourishment from the vine begins to wither. Even if we know the truth but try to live it by our own power and resources, we begin to wither. Forgiveness, but out of the depths of our own understanding; trying to help others, but out of the pity of our own compassion; love, but out of the affection and acceptance of our own great hearts; dreams of great accomplishment, but out of our own need for fame or recognition – it will never work for long. We do not carry enough sap within us to do it very well or for very long – unless the vine is backing it up with its full and endless flow.

A withered branch is a branch that tries to be great enough to go it alone. “Give some people an inch and they think they are a ruler.” A “sucker” tries to steal it from others instead of getting it from the vine. While the “sucker” may be very plush itself, it never produces any fruit, and it never gets to experience communion.

Of course, some people make the parable even harder than Jesus intended it. They instantly jump to pictures of the Gardener cutting them off entirely, instead of just pruning. You would have to be totally dead to the Spirit before that could happen. And if that were the case, you wouldn’t care anymore about anything anyway, so no need to worry about that.

Pruning, I remind you, is not punishment. It is improvement – quality control. If you were not worth so much, the Gardener would not bother with the pruning. Pruning is a great favor – as long as it is left up to the Gardener. Which is to remember that branches ought not to take it upon themselves to prune other branches! I have even
seen branches so full of pride that they take it upon themselves to prune themselves. I will fix myself? We have a huge industry dedicated to self-help. How much pride does it take for us to believe we can fix ourselves? Only the Gardener does it well. And when the Gardener does it, it is also an act of love and is done in love.

Next the truth comes in at full strength – in all its grandeur and pathos, in all its hope and terror: “No branch can bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains united with the vine. ... APART FROM ME, YOU CAN DO NOTHING!”

It reminds me of another phrase I once heard: “By myself, I am powerless.” Do you really know this? I must confess that I do not fully know it. Rather, I know it but I have not fully learned it. If I could fully and finally learn it, I would not keep running the gamut between momentary enthusiasm and battle fatigue. I keep wanting to do something on my own – sometimes for my own pleasure or glory, to be sure, but lots of times with my very best motives too. I keep wanting to do something on my own and in my own way. I don’t even like to hear it spoken, but we have to get real here if we are going to get anywhere. So I’m sorry, but sometimes I try to do things, well, to sort of “make Jesus proud of me.” It is a natural human desire, I suppose, to go off alone or in secret to win a battle or to build something good so we can bring it back to the Lord as a kind of special trophy. Maybe then the Lord will truly love us, by which we usually mean “bring us lots of special privileges” and “set us up above the other children.” Only, when we get finished with these tasks we do on our own, they reek of Satan, and all we have won for Christ is more time on the Cross.

We ought to know by now – I ought to know by now – that not just any kingdom will do. Some kingdoms should never have been built in the first place. The greatest failure of all is to succeed at something that never should have been started in the first place. But that is what happens when we set out to earn God’s love instead of trusting God’s love to be there for us already and always. When we trust it, we are on the vine. When we try to earn it, we are already cut off and we are withering.

Most of us do not get famous for our evil any more than we get famous for our good, but that does not limit or define the repercussions of our efforts in either direction. The most important thing to know in all Christendom next to the Gospel of God’s love itself is this great truth and warning: “APART FROM ME, YOU CAN DO NOTHING.” STAY ON THE VINE! I wonder what our world would be like today
if all the Christians would get off of all the missions the Holy Spirit has not sent them on. The only thing better would be if we also got onto the real missions that we have been sent on.

Maybe someone here today is feeling like the person in the Bible Study group who said, “I know some things I can do apart from Jesus. I can brush my teeth and go to the movies and play golf without Jesus.” To which a friend replied, “I don’t know about your teeth, but that explains a lot about your golf game.” Most of us would nevertheless agree that we can make money, drive cars, practice law, build cities, or make scientific progress apart from Jesus if we choose to – at least apart from any conscious awareness of the Christ.

As so very frequently, John sees and reflects Jesus as the Eternal Spirit who was from the beginning – who always was and always will be, whether people are aware of it or name it or not. In that case, even brushing our teeth will not qualify as an exception. But giving it a half-truth rating, people can do many things without having any conscious awareness of the help they are receiving. Even that may be nit-picking. Hear the verse “Apart from ME, you can accomplish nothing” this way: Apart from Jesus Christ – the Vine – we can do nothing of value, nothing of importance, nothing for God’s Kingdom, nothing of eternal worth or value. In that light, there are no exceptions.

Pruning, despite its good purpose, is not really the Good News. And being reminded of my dependency on the vine, while it feels good for the perspective it brings, is not really the Good News either. But having felt the truth and the reality and the necessity of both, then the PROMISE comes in full strength and high glory: “Anyone who dwells in me, as I dwell in them, bears much fruit.... Ask what you will, and you shall have it.” This is assuming that we are on the vine, with the channels wide open. To be sure, being on the vine changes the nature of our requests. Still, there is no limit to the flow. In fact, if bearing fruit is what you are here for and care about, then the more you ask, the better the vine likes it.

I love that promise! Do you? I mean, half of my troubles are because I want to bear fruit: I want to do something right some day, accomplish something of value, make a difference for people, be a part of Christ’s Kingdom. It is the same for you, yes? And here is this glorious PROMISE. It is what we get from the vine that produces the fruit. If I stay on the vine, I don’t have to worry anymore about how well I am doing. And you don’t either. We cannot dwell in His love without
producing fruit. It is a universal impossibility! That is where the joy gets complete. If we are on the vine, we are open to God’s power; whatever seems to be going on around us, fruit will come of it. (“All things work together for good, for those who love God.”)

So we just keep “being there” – keep dwelling in Christ – and the power and love and LIFE of the vine takes over and flows freely. The stress goes out of the effort, the impossible tasks become the joyful play of trusting children, and the fruit grows.

It is not like that every day, for me; just sometimes. But I know it can be. It is more that way now, and more often than it used to be. Nevertheless, the power is not in me or in you or in us together. The power is in the vine. If we will drink, the fruit will grow. And that is the promise of the Christ!

PRAYER

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord, and we are on it. We sometimes scream and rant and fret and swear, and say that we don’t want to be on it – that we would rather be elsewhere. Until we stop and ask: Where would we rather be? On some desert isle? In some make-believe story? Perhaps in our own real world, where we are rich and privileged and blessed and fortunate, though all who are around us are starving and wretched and hopeless? No, Lord, we could not stand that either. We would like to be rich and healthy and fearless and faithful so we could serve You more. But better to be together with the poor and the sick and the dying, than alone and rich, or alone and well, or alone and uncaring.

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord, and we are on it. We thank You for that! We thank You for thinking us worthy of experiencing LIFE in Your dimensions. We thank You for all the joy and pain of LOVE and LIFE. Forgive us for complaining. Forgive us for wanting to escape. Welcome us anew as we turn back continually toward Thee.

The lathe of Heaven turns, Lord. You are the Master Carpenter. Shape us as You will. We come rough-hewn to Thy bench, knowing not our true shape or design. Cut away as You must. Shape and form us, until we are fully Thine. Give us the likeness of the Son of Man, in whose name we now pray together, saying, “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 sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”

DEDICATION OF COVENANTS

Grateful we are, O Lord, for the chances we have to make covenants with Thee. Even so, we know and remember that teaming up with You is never our idea. You always start the conversations and make the promises, and then invite us into the drama. It is always amazing and incredible to us; at first we do not believe it. But we believe it now. Thank You – Thank You!

And we pray that You will receive and bless these covenants that we make to You and with each other this day. In Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.

BENEDICTION

May the God of love fill you with all peace and joy in believing – that you may abound in love, by the power of the Holy Spirit, which you have received. Amen.