

Covenant Faithfulness

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A Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Mark 10:2-16

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An afternoon trip to the bookstore yields endless possibilities for the future. As I shuffle from current affairs, to sociology, to cooking and religion and back again, my eyes alight upon titles that offer instruction on leadership skills, money management, home organization, or a diet that finally works despite my weakness for beer and cookies. Still books will help me determine whether my complexion is more of a summer or an autumn; how I can have a fulfilling marriage (should I want one!); or, at the very least, how to have a picture-perfect wedding day. I find solutions to problems I didn't know that I had, while I look for answers for the ones I know very well: I want to be a better speaker. I want to be funnier. I want to be a good man. I want to be a better friend. I want to be a faithful Christian.

Productivity gurus tell us that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert at something.¹ That seems great for learning Spanish, or for practicing a skilled trade. But what can I read, and how should I practice, if I want to become an expert-level friend or partner? You know, I'll happily take advice from anyone who's logged even just 5,000 waking hours of "being a good husband."

But what if it's more likely that I've logged 10,000 hours of pettiness? Or 10,000 hours of depression? What's the alternative to becoming an expert at friendship or marriage? How long can I be a novice at these things, and still keep my friends? How long would my marriage hold together?

The good news is that the God of Jesus Christ meets our weakness with compassion. God's compassion catches up our best intentions, shortcomings, and mixed motives in a covenant friendship. A covenant is a set of binding promises that friends make as they walk into a shared future. When we enter covenant with God, or make covenant with one

¹ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2009).

another, we fix our eyes upon a shared hope. We make promises to care for one another in ways that reflect our best possible selves.

Each of us here is party to various covenants. Much of the Church's life is driven by two very common ones: baptism and marriage. Consider the vow that each partner makes in the Church's wedding liturgy: "In the name of God, I take you, 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, until we are parted by death."² Remember the promises we make at baptism: we renounce every force that rebels against God; we renounce all powers that corrupt and destroy God's creatures; we renounce all sinful desires that draw us from God's love; we put our "whole trust" in the grace and love of Jesus, and we promise to follow and obey him as Lord.³

Just last week, at our patronal feast, three children were united to Christ by baptism. Their parents and godparents made promises on their behalf that envision a future with God in the church, in which the children grow up into lives of courage, holiness, and justice. We also made promises to support them in that journey. Every week we renew that covenant by a ritual meal at the table of the Lord.

Not all covenants are religious. I'm a teacher, and I make promises to my students that go behind my contract. The baseline promise I make to them on the first day is unconditional respect. In making that promise, I invite a commitment from them to speak openly and honestly, so that we can learn to debate one another in a spirit of kindness. If one of us breaks faith by insulting another, I'm less interested in punishing the error, but rather concerned with repairing the breach so that we can all be better together.

Friendship is another kind of covenant. Sometimes we make explicit promises: to always take someone's call, or to care for one another's kids in moments of crisis. We might commit to weekly chats or monthly lunches or yearly vacations with one another. When we're struggling with depression or anxiety or poor health, it's often our friends who promise to come and get us.

We make *implicit* promises as well: when we hurt one another, we apologize. When one person's life seems a complete mess, her friends come and sit with her. Friends don't shame us for our shortcomings but push us to be our best selves. When we offer

² "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage," *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 427.

³ "Holy Baptism," *Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 302-3.

friendship, we're often surprised by the practices of faithfulness that are evoked by difficult circumstances. When a parent, spouse, or child dies, friends come around to listen for days, months, and years later. We bury one another's pets.

On the day that we make such promises, very few of us will be equal to the lifetime of challenges that we will face in seeking to keep them. That's why making a covenant is an expression of hope. The promises that we make to God and to one another echo in our hearts and minds, and call us to grow up into our best possible selves. A covenant envisions a shared future - a good future - and our promises express our commitment to build it. We can never anticipate all of the challenges we'll face as we hang in with one another. We are often surprised by someone's creative faithfulness, and sometimes shocked by a cruel betrayal. The promises we make give us a nurturing space as we learn to risk loving each other. They give us space to learn to forgive, and to be forgiven.

Of course, all of us break faith with our covenant partners at some time or another, whether in religion, in friendship, or in marriage. We envision these covenants as permanent, but sometimes we end them. One of the most painful and visible forms of broken covenant is the end of a marriage. You might recognize today's Gospel reading as a "clobber text." A clobber text is any passage of Scripture that folks use to beat down other people, so that we'll know we're on bad terms with God. Such a one will often draw a line under the passage and draw a line under our entire lives and declare, "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it." That's a favorite refrain of folks who love to feign shock at the sins of others, and we've no use for that here.

In this passage, Jesus' opponents approach him with a controversial biblical question, and they're ready to clobber him. The Lord turns the tables by undercutting the privilege of the powerful. The Law of Moses allowed divorce because humans are imperfect covenant partners, and only God keeps faith perfectly. But for the people of Jesus' day, as in much of the world now, women were not free and independent agents in either contracting or dissolving a marriage. A man commonly took a wife when she was between 12 and 16, and a divorce meant that after her healthiest and most energetic years, she was returned to her aging parents or extended family, or to no one at all. Jesus overturns the patriarchal privilege by calling such men adulterers and subverts it further by suggesting that a woman might actually *choose* in marriage and divorce.

Everyone here has broken faith with a promise before, whether in friendship, marriage, or religion. Everyone in this room has been touched by divorce. Very few of us lives out a

sparkling, traditional image of a perfect, permanent, heterosexual marriage, oriented toward procreation and the nurture of children.⁴

But you know what? Only God keeps covenant perfectly. Only God never breaks a promise. You are not God. So take a breath. If you're feeling the despair of a broken covenant, hear me say clearly, that God welcomes covenant-breakers. God continues in faithfulness because God still envisions a future with you and with me. It means that "we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things" (Ephesians 2:8-10). It means that our mistakes and our broken promises and our even greatest sins aren't yet the last word. They don't determine the meaning of our lives. The God of Jesus welcomes us as little children, needy and unfinished and inconsistent, and guides us into a future together.

Amen.



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⁴ Some Christian communities insist that the most important failure in a marriage covenant is the choice to end it. I condemn this position in the strongest possible terms. The marriage covenant is broken by many offenses much more grave, such as when a partner causes deliberate harm to another (especially through physical, emotional, or sexual abuse), or when a partner harms children. No grand image of "the sacrament of marriage" is worth the destruction of anyone's life. To paraphrase Jesus' teaching on the Sabbath: people aren't made for marriage. Marriage is made for people.

The Episcopal Church allows for the dissolution of a marriage, and it is the bishops' prerogative to invite Christians to celebrate a second marriage in church.