

"DC Covenants"

A meditation based on Isaiah 42:1-4, 5-9;

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25; John 13:34-38, 21:15-17

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Redlands United Church of Christ

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I LOVE COVENANTS and I love Covenant Season! As did Jesus with Peter in giving him a chance to move beyond whatever stifles and to continue growing on the spiritual journey, so covenants bring with them a similar invitation to each one of us. Every year, about this time, we prepare to write our annual covenants, and by so doing, we say in effect, "Count me in!" for yet another year of membership in Redlands United Church of Christ. One of the many reasons I love covenants is that covenant writing is a type of spiritual discipline I can actually accomplish, coming as it does, only once a year! But there is more... In writing a covenant, we each are invited to prayerfully and thoughtfully and lovingly ponder our own spiritual journey, our place on that journey, and from that place, to declare our needs and our intentions for the growth of our spiritual life. Multiply your own spiritual work in writing a covenant by about 150 or 200 souls...and there is a lot of praying and transformation going on! I have noticed over the years of ministry with you, that being a covenant-writing community nets a much more dedicated membership, with more investment in programs and a deeper commitment of leadership.

Eight years ago, when I first learned about the covenant process utilized here at Redlands UCC, I was reading the search committee's informational packet. Sandwiched between the cheerful cover letter by Chairperson Steve Morics and the official congregational profile, was included a one-page description of Covenanting. I remember sitting at our dining table, carefully reading that page, then turning to John who was tending the fire in our woodstove, and saying to him, "This is very

cool!" Not exactly my most theologically profound statement...yet a from-the-heart reaction that is still true for me today.

Covenant writing is cool! The founders of our congregation would agree, I believe! Nearly 35 years ago, these pilgrims were looking to give birth to a congregation that would be unique in Redlands—committed to justice and radically welcoming of all—whose work and ministry would be inspired and informed as much by the inward journey as by the outward journey. This was to be a different sort of church, and so they and their founding pastors looked to another congregation that was equally as distinct in its community. Way across the country, located in our nation's capital, stood the various facets of the congregation known as The Church of the Saviour.

The Church of the Saviour began with 9 people in 1947, who shared the uncomplicated purpose of becoming a more authentic Christian community. Founding pastors, Gordon and Mary Crosby, began to craft an unusual church structure: Members had to commit to an inward journey of daily quiet prayer, meditation and courses on Christianity as well as an outward journey of social justice work. People were held accountable to this inward/outward journey by gathering in small groups. Additionally, on an annual basis, after a period of intentional discernment, all members renew—or withdraw—their covenantal membership. "Integrity of membership" (as their covenanting process is termed) helps members to really choose whether or not they still are called to the challenges and joys of this way of journeying with Jesus and Jesus' friends.

At the heart of The Church of the Saviour's model is Call—each one, together with others, discovering unique ways to carry part of God's dream. "Since the early '50s," writes one long-time member, "we've focused on this business of call, which is to say, 'This is God's call. I've got to do this.' We're totally committed to the inner life, the life of prayer and worship, of deepening our capacity to love, working with the blockages of love, journaling, and retreats. All of that goes under the heading of the inward life. And with that comes a real, worthy, challenging mission in the world."

In small mission groups, members gather around a shared vision for embodying healing and hope—the outward journey—and that group then becomes accountable to one another for the inward

journey, including ordered practices in the areas of prayer, study, money, health, work life and so on. Over the 60+ years of the congregation's life, hundreds of significant ministries have come to life in this manner. Currently, Church of the Saviour has nine distinct congregations, each meeting and working at different times and locations throughout the greater Washington, DC area. From these congregations—some as small as a dozen or less people covenanted to one another and to God—emanates the 42 independently incorporated ministries of The Church of the Saviour. A spin through their website reveals that these covenanted folks are immersed in serving others. The nine independent-but-covenanted congregations, provide:

- Reading, math, computer education for adults
- A guest house for out-of-town visitors to the church community
- Spiritual support across racial, economic and other cultural divides
- Transitional housing for women and children
- Residential medical care for homeless adults
- Medical clinic
- A community where formerly homeless people with AIDS and chronic substance abuse can rest, heal and grow towards a positive future
- A retreat center apart for silent retreat
- An internship program in one of the ministries while living in community
- Job placement assistance
- Conversation at the intersection of faith and money
- Drop-in center for families of young children
- Gathering place for meetings and events and a Servant Leadership School
- Supportive services for the most vulnerable children in the city
- A program which encourages wealthy Christians to freely and joyfully respond with their lives and money according to the leading of God's Spirit
- Support to children and families through foster care

- Hospice for homeless persons with AIDS and other illnesses
- Affordable housing and Job placement services
- Support for women in the work force
- Residence for homeless women with AIDS and their children
- Individual and group counseling
- Coffeehouse and bookstore
- Addictions recovery and transitional housing
- Senior center and apartments
- Classes and events for discipleship preparation
- Acupuncture clinic
- Arts enrichment for neighborhood children
- Concerts and open-mic events to benefit area non-profits
- A Writing, Speaking, and Preaching program that Tells the Word and Speaks Truth to Power

The Church of the Saviour was never a conventional church. Instead, for 62 years this small, unusual group based in Northwest Washington has quietly fueled a revolution in faith-based activism. Interpreting the call to discipleship as the integration of two journeys in community—an inward journey to grow in love of God, self and others and an outward journey to help mend some part of creation—this church has become a catalyst for God, Spirit, Christ to be embodied in our nation’s capital. Founding pastor, Gordon Cosby notes insightfully, “Temperamentally, most people are either given to the inward journey but don’t want to be bothered with the outward work and getting their hands dirty with the poor; or they want to get out there with the poor and they don’t have time for the inward life – they’re just going to get the world fixed. We said both. To me that is one of the most important things we’ve done...anybody can have a prayer group, a group to study scriptures, therapy groups, anything they want to. We’ve had hundreds of them through the years. That’s all right. We welcome it. But the membership structure [here] is based on a person being called to the inward life and the outward journey [at the same time and] in the same group.”

When I sat in worship four years ago in the beautiful brownstone building in NW Washington DC, which serves as the hub of this multi-faceted Church of the Savior, it was as if I had found our spiritual parents! There the commitment level was palpable. There the interest in scripture was enlightening. There, people sang heartily, prayed deeply, and listened intuitively to hear the voice of the Divine speaking through it all. And, here, too, at Redlands UCC, our vision of what church is and can be continues as radically inclusive and covenant-driven as it was 35 years ago.

Here at Redlands United Church of Christ, we don't just write covenants, we are covenants! That is what scripture suggests to us today. The prophet Isaiah makes the point most plainly, as he speaks God's words, "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations..." What does such a covenant person do? Opens blind eyes and frees dungeon-dwelling prisoners. A covenant person embodies the Divine with delight, acknowledges the Spirit that is within, is faithful in bringing forth justice in the city, and is tireless in establishing justice in the earth. A covenant person is a teacher, one who breathes God's breath and declares the new things about to occur.

In the book of Hebrews, we read that a covenant person seeks a true heart, full faith, and unwavering hope... Knowing that such treasures come only through community, the biblical author adds, "And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another..." Those words could have been written by Gordon Cosby or any of the members of The Church of the Saviour or any of us here at Redlands UCC. They invite us to see the truth: the Christian path is equally an inward journey and an outward journey. To grow, we must be in community, working and praying, studying and sharing, envisioning and serving, with one another.

The gospel lesson I chose especially for today has the necessary forgiveness factor written all over it. Peter, like us, messes up on the spiritual journey. Jesus sees and knows and forgives, and goes one more step...Jesus makes a way for Peter to make amends. Three times Peter denied even knowing Jesus. Three times Jesus offers Peter a chance to say what is really on his heart. "Do you love me?" "Yes, YES, and YES!!!" is Peter's hearty reply. And one more step then, invites Jesus, just

one more step that weaves together the inward and the outward journeys. “Then feed my lambs... tend my sheep... feed my sheep...”

Being in covenant—one with another and each with the Divine—is, in the words of Gordon Cosby, “a commitment that says to a specific group of people that I am willing to be with you. I am willing to belong to you, I am willing to be the people of God with you...[this] is a commitment to a group of miserable, faltering sinners who make with me a covenant to live in depth until we see in each other the mystery of Christ himself and until in these relationships we come to know ourselves as belonging to the Body of Christ.”

Friends in Christ, we have a ways to go to be with others on this type of deepening inward and outward journey. We have a ways to go in listening for Spirited callings and creating structures to support and enable the dreams that are given. We are not perfect...but for 35 years here and for 62 years there, we and our parents in faith have been faithful in covenant community. At the heart of the tradition that is The Church of the Saviour and Redlands United Church of Christ is this commitment called “covenant” that weaves us together while also respecting the variegated colors of our particular strand. More than programs or methods, it is an organic model for being Church, seeking always to embody more deeply the essence and nature of Jesus Christ, who brings good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed—proclaiming an era of Jubilee for all God’s family. There is a distance between here and there—between this community of faith and that Kingdom of Love and Compassion—and, friends, I have come to believe that the distance is reduced one faithful and honest covenant at a time. I look forward more than you can imagine to reading yours.

Amen and Blessed Be!