

COVENANT KEEPERS
Matthew 11:16-30
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Benjamin Franklin was leaving Independence Hall in Philadelphia after voting for the new Constitution when a Mrs. Powell approached him and asked, "Well Dr. Franklin what type of government have you given us?" He answered, "A republic, if you can keep it."

A republic with equal rights guaranteed for all is the hardest form of government to keep because it involves fair and honest cooperation from the bottom up. In the short run it's more efficient having a competent, benevolent dictator as the strong man has the power to enforce his will. But that type of society can't sustain itself, witness the implosion of the Soviet Union after decades of tyranny.

Democracy is messier yet with a strong constitution and a vigilant people the system does work, despite itself. Thankfully the Founders included in the Constitution a system of checks and balances between the branches of government, a Bill of Rights safeguarding our freedoms as well as a mechanism of self correction in the form of amending the Constitution to strengthen our way of life.

The same can be said for living in Christian Community. God calls us to live and serve together with a spirit of mutual respect and cooperation. A congregation cannot survive for long with a strong, even benevolent pastor at the top no matter how competent he or she happens to be. Sooner or later churches like that implode leaving its members beaten up and bloodied by the roadside.

Franklin was wise enough to realize that just declaring a constitutional republic wasn't the same as keeping it. He knew there'd need to be commitment, patience, cooperation as well as the shedding of blood, toil, tears and sweat from each succeeding generation if the American experiment was going to work.

Likewise God's covenant with Israel needed to be constantly and carefully nurtured and corrected by the Jews if they were going to be that city on the hill blessing all the nations of the earth. Each succeeding generation was expected to renew the Covenant by being faithful and obedient to God and loving and respectfully of each other.

Unfortunately that wasn't always the case. A quick read of the Old Testament and the Gospels reveal not every generation chose to be covenant keepers. Too many times the political and religious leaders cherry picked the beliefs and practices they wanted to follow and threw out the most important ones. When God sent the prophets to try to talk sense and pull

them back from impending disaster more times than not they rejected the prophets and went their merry way.

This explains Jesus' frustration with the Pharisees and Sadducees, his generation's self-appointed keepers of the Covenant.

"...to what shall I compare this generation? It's like children sitting in the market places calling to one another,

"We played the flute for you

and you did not dance

we wailed and you did not mourn." (Matthew 11:16-17)

The religious establishment tried to force on the people beliefs and practices not necessarily in sync with God's will. Their interpretation of the scriptures was stagnant, all law and little if any grace. When John the Baptist and then Jesus came along preaching a gospel of religious freedom, the establishment closed ranks. They were all about keeping control, which explains why so many people turned away from organized religion. When John the Baptist, and later Jesus, offered the better way dusty old teachings suddenly took on a new life leaving the people to wonder if the religious establishment was misleading them all along.

Of course what happened then still happens today. Latter day Phariseeism is alive and well which explains today's drift away from organized religion in our generation. People are still turned off and driven away by authoritarian religion. All the more reason for us to remember the New Covenant made in Christ. "This is my body broken for you, This is my blood shed for you. Take and eat. Take and Drink. Remember me."

Christ's Gospel is all about God becoming one of us to bring freedom to love and be loved, unconditionally and without reservation. Get that word out and people will listen and respond. Maybe they won't refill our pews but they will know the freedom from the confusion, despair and oppression that keeps us down and out.

"Come to me all you that are weary from carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, get to know me for I am gentle and humble and you will find rest for your souls."

Whenever I hear that invitation my heart melts. There's still hope, Jesus came to save me from my doubts and fears, to comfort me in my sadness, strengthen my resolve and free me from any burden keeping me from keeping the Covenant made in Christ.

The Pharisees and Sadducees opposed Jesus' way of engaging people because they were too busy taking care of business running the religious establishment instead of taking care of people loving and serving them the way Jesus did. They couldn't or wouldn't imagine that keeping the covenant wasn't just about following Sabbath laws and ritual cleanliness. It sounds silly until we realize we too have our own litmus tests that keep us from following Jesus'

example of welcoming outcasts and sinners, people in the same boat we find ourselves in thus excusing us from being good neighbors like the Good Samaritan.

Unfortunately we're not always ready to repent or turn away from our old way of doing things, not because we're bad people but because we can't appreciate that keeping the covenant Christ offers is the more excellent way. All we can see is that it costs too much.

Since this is the July 4th weekend I thought I'd close with a story. Two months after the heady celebrations surrounding the first July 4th in 1776 it seemed the fight for freedom and independence was a lost cause. Washington's army was defeated three times in critical battles and he was on the run. On December 31st the volunteers' six months enlistments would be up and there were no replacements.

In early December Thomas Paine published a pamphlet called "The Crisis." Listen to what he wrote.

"These are times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from service to his country but he that stands now deserves the love and thanks of all men. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered yet we have this consolation, the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap we esteem too lightly."

It's interesting, if you change a word here and there like "soldier" to "disciple" and "country" to "God's Kingdom" this passage could pass for one of Paul's New Testament letters:

"The sunshine disciple will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of God's Kingdom, yet we have this consolation, the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph... What we obtain too cheaply we esteem too lightly."

Jesus said, "Come to me, throw away your burdens, anything that holds you down and I will lift you up and give you rest. Take my yoke, take on the mantle of the servant lifestyle and learn from my example. You will find your life becoming less confusing and hard for the life I give you is clear and simple and your soul will be at rest."

Jesus also said, "This is my body, this is my blood. Take and eat; take and drink. Remember me."

At this table we are invited and empowered by the New Covenant in Christ's blood won for us and our salvation. Can we keep it?