

“THE BAD NEWS ABOUT DISCIPLESHIP”
Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:23-31; Mark 8:31-38
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It happens every day. Two people stand up in front of family and friends and promise their lives to each other. They promise to love each other always, to cherish each other in sickness and in health. They covenant to be for and with each other in all circumstances as long as they both shall live. Some people watching, the older ones there, cry; some take the hand of their life partner, give it a squeeze. Some shake their heads and exchange furtive smiles with their friends. There's a secret in the room, a secret shared by all those who have experience. And that secret is how hard it's going to be for this newly married couple to live up to the promises just made with such passion and trust. So we laugh and dance and eat and make toasts, and we cheerfully wave the couple on as they leave the party and begin the day-by-day work of keeping the promises they have made.

Everyone, everyone who makes the large promises of marriage fails at them from time to time. Even the best of us are just not perfect at being always loving, always understanding, sensitively attentive to our life partners all of the time. And there's a cost to that. Statistics tell us that about 50% of those who enter into marriage in this country in these days fail to the point of divorce. We all know all of this, and yet, people keep making these forever promises, and we keep throwing parties for them instead of taking them aside and trying to dissuade them from doing something so difficult, taking on a commitment with such a high failure rate. Have you ever thought about how absurd that is, that we keep encouraging people to make promises that we know are going to be difficult if not impossible to keep?

God said to Abraham, “Walk with me. Live blamelessly, you and your descendants, and I will make you a great people. I will number your descendants as the sands of the beach, as the stars in the sky.” This is the second of God's promises from the book of Genesis that we have heard in this Lenten season. Last week, it was God's promise to Noah. “I have put my bow in the sky as a sign of my promise that I will never again destroy the earth.” This week, it's God's promise to an old and barren man that he will be the father of nations. God makes a lot of promises in Genesis—to Noah, to Abraham and Sarah, to Jacob, to Joseph. God is defined as one who makes significant promises and then keeps them. It's one of the first things we learn about the God of all heaven and earth.

And we, we being made in the image of God, we are promise-makers too. From earliest times, human beings have made promises—about family, about land, about allegiance, about faith. Look at Abraham's promise to God. We've just considered how hard it is for two people to make promises that bind the two of them for one lifetime. Abraham's promise to God was a promise binding generations of people—all those grains of sand on the beach, all those stars in heaven—binding millions of people over the course of centuries and millennia. Talk about a large promise! And the Bible, even as the Bible is an account of God's faithfulness to God's promises, the Bible is an account of how the descendants of Abraham did, have done at keeping their end

of the bargain. I think it can be easily said that though we, like God, are promise-makers, we're not so good at keeping our promises as God.

Peter, and James, and John, and the rest of Jesus's disciples made promises to follow Jesus. Of course, they made those promises in the early days of Jesus' ministry. There was Jesus teaching, healing, performing miracles. The crowds just kept getting bigger, and the star of the rabbi of Nazareth was on the rise. But then Jesus started talking about being rejected, suffering, dying. Peter tried to get him to stop, and Jesus rebuked him, saying, "If any of you want to promise yourselves to me, then take up the cross and follow me." And for 2000 years, all of us who follow Jesus make our promise with those words before our faces. The promise to be Christian, like all other significant promises, involves a future landscape, the contours of which we can at best vaguely see, and we know that promise will someday require of us more than we want to give, more than we think we can give. To make the promise of faith is an invitation to the possibility of hardship and failure in matters large and small, from breaking this year's Lenten discipline to betraying what we know to be right for thirty pieces of silver.

So why do we keep doing it all? It is the cynic's question, or, some might say, the rational person's question. Look at the descendants of Abraham, stretched out far beyond the reach of the Hebrew Bible. Jews, Christians, Muslims: all of them children of Abraham. How often have these, as individuals and as groups, failed to keep their promises of fidelity to their God? Worse, how often has evil—true evil—been done by all of these under terrible misapprehension of what it means to be faithful to God? Would we be better off, would the world be better off, if there were no promises of faith and discipleship made at all? There are many who believe so. Just as, on a personal level, looking at the public statistics of divorce and family abuse as well as the private bruises and disappointments of every marriage relationship, there are those who believe we would be better off if we quit trying, if we quit making promises we can't keep, and began making commitments only for the here and now, to be renegotiated as life and its circumstances change. Is it the way of wisdom to assert that if we tried less, believed less, committed less, and expected less, we would damage and be damaged less? Some days you have to wonder.

But then there are the other days... When I was in Bozeman two weeks ago, Lois told me of the work of the inter-faith hospitality center, a homeless shelter and day center supported by virtually all of the inter-faith community: conservative and liberal Christians, the Jewish community, Unitarians, Muslims, Bahais. The Episcopalians partner for their weeks with the synagogue, the Unitarians work with the Mormons—who says God doesn't have a sense of humor—and the poorest of the poor are welcomed and served. How many hospitals have been started by people of faith? How many schools and social service agencies? How many times has oppression been denounced and tyrants called to account? How many hungry have been fed, and strangers welcomed, the sad and lost been kept company by people of faith? How often have the children of Abraham faithfully followed Micah's commandment to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God? It is not a perfect record by any means, but for every tale of evil done, one can also point to acts of courage, selflessness and compassion by the people of God acting in faith. And in the personal arena as well, though we can point a finger at too many failures of love and fidelity in the most intimate promises we make to each other, most of us have also seen and been moved by the well-worn beloved face of love grown old together. We have seen marriage

partners stumble, fall, and yet get up and go on again, deepened by their struggle. We have seen those damaged by love learn to trust, and lives made extraordinary by a partner's unswerving support.

Our God is a God of large promises, and we, the people of God, it is our nature to make large, impossible promises as well. And the bad news of our discipleship is that in our hopes, in our aspirations, in the promises and commitments we make, there will always be error; there will always be failure; there will always be struggle; there will always be pain. The only way to avoid that is to quit trying; to promise less and accomplish less. In the UCC Statement of Faith, we affirm that God calls us into the church to accept both the joy and the cost of discipleship. We can't have the one without the other. So we should keep making promises too large to keep well, make them throughout our life to God and to each other—and throw parties when those extraordinary promises are made. For only there is the possibility to create of our lives and of our faith something of beauty, of enduring value, lives that give testimony to the unswerving goodness of our God. Thanks be to God. Amen.