

The Essence of the Covenant  
Elizabeth Communities of Faith Lenten Series  
March 7, 2012  
St. Martin's Episcopal Church  
Rev. John Cleghorn

Scripture: Deuteronomy 10:16-19

Babylonian Talmud (700 c.e.)

On one occasion it happened that a certain man came before (Rabbi) Shammai and said to him, "I will convert to Judaism, on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot." Thereupon Shammai repulsed him with a builder's ruler, which was in his hand. When the man went before (Rabbi) Hillel, he said to him, "Love your neighbor as yourself," that is the whole Torah, while the rest is commentary, now go and learn it."

I want to thank Murdock, Budd and all the saints here at St. Martins for hosting this series this year. It's a demanding – but enriching – opportunity for discipleship, from printing the promotional materials to recruiting the sponsor restaurants to counting the soup spoons. We appreciate it. And, from your younger sister across the park, which is only 100 years old this year, happy birthday from Caldwell to St. Martin's on this, its 125 anniversary.

Now ... I realize that it's not every day that you come to an Episcopal church in the season of Lent to hear a Presbyterian minister quote the Talmud, a book of ancient Hebrew wisdom. But, as the kids say, "that's how we roll" here in Elizabeth.

I need to credit Rabbi Noam Raucher, a fellow board member at Mecklenburg Ministries, for bringing this reading from the Talmud to my attention. He used it as a devotional at a meeting just last week. I realized it was a perfect match with the reading from Deuteronomy on justice that I'd chosen to preach many weeks ago.

In my study Bible, perhaps like yours, there are sub headings that break up the text into sections. The sub-heading above this passage of Deuteronomy in my Bible describes it as "the essence of the Covenant." In this season of Lent – and in our effort to relate our Lenten journey to the role of justice in our faith – this passage goes straight to the heart of our role as disciples.

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The book of Deuteronomy frames God's expectations of Israel as the chosen people, the chosen nation as given to their leader, Moses. I don't know if Moses used the technique of the three-point sermon. But this passage amounts to just that.

Point # 1: The Lord is *the* "big G" God. God of gods. Lord of lords, above and beyond every idol the Israelites encountered then and every idol we might worship today.

Point # 2: Nothing, nothing can sway God's love for us. God can't be distracted or bought off or bribed or lured away. God's love for God's children is unshakeable.

Point #3: God holds a particular love and concern for those who live on the margins of society. In the age of Moses, those were the orphan, the widow and the stranger, one we might think of as the foreigner. God provides food and clothing, the scripture says. God executes justice. And, God expects God's people to do the same. Just as the children of Israel had been strangers and outcasts and God had provided for them, they were to provide security and fair treatment for the outcasts of the land that would now be theirs.

This was covenant living, a social compact that was to define and differentiate Israel ... a common understanding of a mutual interdependence. None were to be left behind or ignored left on the margins. Part of loving God – and a big part – was loving neighbor. This was the essence of the Covenant. The rest, as the Talmud said, is commentary.

What does covenant living look like, and where does the church fit in? Certainly, the church has, for centuries, worked to care for orphans, widows and newcomers. Here in 2012, we must ask ourselves who – in our time – lives on the margin and needs us, the church, to stand up for them. We have plenty of food banks and clothes closets. Right here in Elizabeth, our churches work together to feed and clothe and shelter those who need our help, those who are vulnerable and powerless.

I speak for everyone at Caldwell in saying "thanks" for your generosity and strong support for Caldwell House, the transitional shelter we host and that the Salvation Army operates. You have invested money and prepared meals. Just last night, Angie Ford from St. Martin's and her cast of singers came to Caldwell House to serenade the ladies. And, more recently, St. John's has taken in several homeless families in a point of their vulnerability, providing them time and space to get back on their feet. St. John's partnership with Charlotte Family Housing is a great blessing. Thanks be to God.

But part of Covenant living is a vigilance, a readiness and awareness of who else may be vulnerable and how we might share our blessings to help them through their

wilderness. Here in Elizabeth, we have been having conversations about an opportunity to welcome another vulnerable population – those who have been homeless, are disabled and, in many cases, are recovering from addictions.

We have a chance to advocate for a fair and just neighborhood-wide conversation about how and under what conditions we would welcome these folk as neighbors. These are strangers, too, are they not? These are men and women and families who are committed to getting back on their feet and contributing to society and the neighborhood, just like you and me.

Yet, to date at least, we have sat back and allowed fear to replace fairness in this dialogue. Rather than engaging constructively and openly with the project's developer and would-be operators, we have kept them at arm's length. Rather than seeing if we could get to "yes," we have defaulted to "no" in fairly short order. Along the way, we have allowed others to demonize these would-be neighbors, even in the face of a mountain of evidence here and nationally that these kinds of communities can be an asset to any neighborhood.

God said to Moses in today's reading in Deuteronomy, "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

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If there were a mantra that we might adopt this Lent, it might be that old familiar saying, "There but for the grace of God go I." That, too is the essence of the covenant. It's the old covenant between God and Israel and among all the people of Israel. That covenant reminded Israel that God took the initiative to free them from captivity and bring them into the promised land. God took the initiative and Israel received the gift of God's grace.

In Lent, we dwell on the New Covenant, how God took the initiative again in Christ Jesus. Christ took on the sins of the world, all the way to the cross and the tomb. But he also took on the powers that be and reminded them of God's expectation that we should all execute justice for the vulnerable, the widow, the orphan and the stranger. In other words, those who are marginalized and voiceless.

This, of course, is the New Covenant in which we are to live and it is expressed so well in that familiar phrase, "There but for the grace of God go I."

"There but for the grace of God go I."

There, into the shadows of chronic illness, go I ... but for the grace of God.

There, into the grips of addiction, go I ... but for the grace of God.

There, into long-term unemployment and foreclosure, go I ... but for the grace of God.

There, onto the streets, go I ... but for the grace of God.

You can think of your own uses of that prayer.

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When we baptize children at Caldwell, and perhaps at your churches, we say the words, "We love God because God first loved us." That, too, is the essence of the covenant. The "big G" God who cannot be swayed or bribed or sidetracked for even a moment loved us in Christ and, in Him, outlined a covenant through which we are to treat each other.

If we want to take the easy way out, we can point fingers at the orphan or the widow or the immigrant stranger or the disabled, recovering addict and find fault that releases us from our responsibility. We can do the same with the agencies that seek to help them.

Or, in this Lent, we can admit our own brokenness and shortcoming. Our brokenness may take different forms. It may not put us on the street or in recovery programs. But we are broken nonetheless.

Still, out of that brokenness, we as a neighborhood – a wonderfully resourceful and committed neighborhood – can muster creativity and cooperation and collaboration. Surely, we can find ways to love and welcome and live with our neighbors of all kinds.

And, we can say the words, over and over again until they finally sink in:

"There but for the grace of God go I."

"There but for the grace of God go I."

"There but for the grace of God go I."

The rest, friends and neighbors, is just commentary.

Amen.