

“New Covenant = New Way
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Sometimes there is more to a rock song than what you automatically think of. The choir sang, “Philosophers and ploughmen each must know their part, to sow a new mentality, closer to the heart.” It is everyone’s part, according to Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson, to work for positive change - that is what they were trying to say in the song: A place exists where everyone has the opportunity to do their very best. That is what they were trying to say. “You can be the captain,” they said, “and I will draw the chart, sailing into destiny - closer to the heart.”

Now, it is the captain who draws the chart and so, what the writers were trying to say by that is, there isn’t any one leader. You can be the captain, but I will draw the chart. We will be leaders together and that is how we make it into destiny and get closer to the heart. It speaks of people willing to share leadership. It talks about people taking turns, and not to grab after power; and, when you do that you become closer to the heart - you become more faithful, happy and loving. You find humility.

Now the covenant with Jeremiah, speaks of one who is a person who God loved - that is *called* for. A covenant with Jeremiah speaks about the power coming from God - and not something we should be possessing - but as part of the covenant, each must know our part. God has a part in this covenant - so do you and so do I. We each may have a different job description in fulfilling that covenant, but it still requires shared leadership. The covenant, as it is put together, is a binding document between God and other human beings - all of the chosen, the faithful - are all signing that covenant. And, when we baptize a baby, it is more than just water being placed on the head. When that baby is baptized we are saying, “God has now placed a legal bond, a legal covenant, a legal document, upon the head of this child.” That is what happens in baptism - not just water being sprinkled, or even the Holy Spirit filling that child - but that child is now “legally” bonded with God. That is how legally God sees the covenant relationship between God and the people.

Now, what is remarkable about that bonding - that covenant - is that God didn’t have to do it, and God gave something up when God did that. God gave up some of God’s power, in order to be in a covenant relationship with us; because a covenant - like any legal document - requires something of both parties. Not only do human beings have to take responsibility, as part of that legally binding document, but so does God.

Now, the people can say to God, “You have responsibility to care for us. Now we have responsibility to honor you. We have the responsibility to worship you. We have the responsibility to turn to you in all that we say and do. But, God, you have a responsibility to hold up your end.”

Why in the world would God do that? Because the only way God could be in a loving relationship - to get God’s heart and ours closer - was through drawing up that contract. I try to say that to couples all of the time who just say, “We don’t believe in marriage. We just want to live together.”

Well, I have done marriages and performed ceremonies and done the pre-marital counseling for people who have been living together for 20 years, sometimes. But there is something strange that happens when the rings go on the fingers, when the vows are shared. When the signatures are placed on the document something changes. (They become less happy? [Scott says jokingly.] No. [Laughter] No. That was low-hanging fruit. Sorry.) Something does happen though. People will come back to me a year after they were married, after they had lived together for 20 years, and they would say, “You were right. Our relationship changed. It became deeper. There was something about making that commitment official. There was something about making that commitment binding - that it wasn’t quite as easy to let go and go away if it just didn’t work out. It made it richer and more meaningful, and it brought us closer.”

And that is what God wants for each one of us: To make it harder for God to leave us and for us to leave God. That is remarkable that God would give up that power - that control - in order to want to be in a binding, marriage-like agreement with us - and God never divorces us. God always remains faithful, even when we are not. We can’t get rid of God no matter how hard, because God is saying, “Here is my document. You have to keep loving me. You may not feel like it every minute. I’m not giving up on you. Don’t you dare give up on me.” That is what that covenant means.

Now, how do I get closer to the heart, and live that covenant, and not just do it on paper? And God explained that by bringing Jesus into our lives, so that we couldn’t figure it out when God was distant - so God came in the flesh. God became Jesus the Christ so that we could have an example that was flesh and blood. And Jesus said, “You follow the great commandment.” It is pretty simple. *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your strength, and all your mind.’ And the second commandment is like it: ‘You love your neighbor as yourself.’ Upon those two commandments depends all of the law and the prophets.”*

Love God. Love neighbor. You get closer to the heart. It’s pretty simple. Very hard to live, but pretty simple to say. That is how you do it. So you are already living the covenant because you showed up here today to worship God. You’re honoring God, you’re fulfilling your contract with God. In worship you honor God. In worship you are singing, praying and learning how to get closer to the heart of God.

Now God can only fulfill that Divine commandment to care for you by using other human beings. God rarely if ever comes down with God’s arms and legs and does it God’s self. The way God lives the covenant, the way God fulfills God’s contract, is to use other human beings to be God’s hands and feet and heart. So, when that contract feels broken, it’s because a person is sitting there waiting for God, and it isn’t that God failed. It’s that other people failed to fulfill their contract, and they didn’t help the person who needed God in that moment.

You have a person sitting here who has cried out to God, and God said, “Alright, Scott; alright, Parker; alright, Maddie; come and help.” And, we know what Parker is like. [Laughter] Maddie might look sweet. [Laughter.] And, I was too busy, [so] neither one of us made it. Whose fault was that? Who broke the covenant? God called three different people to help this person and not one of us “heathens” showed up. God didn’t break that covenant - the three of us did.

We can't blame God. God is always trying to get the rest of us to fulfill our covenant by getting us to help one another. When it doesn't happen, it's not that God dropped the ball. The rest of us did.

God doesn't like poverty, and God is screaming at us, "Fulfill your covenant by helping." And we are not doing it. God only has our hands. and our feet. and our voices. to fulfill that covenant. Sometimes God works through guilt, to make us feel so bad about not doing something, that it forces us to do it, and to help even when we don't want to.

Sometimes God even uses our arrogance – "I'm going to do it, so everybody can see me doing it." But at least it gets done. That's why, I think, in the Bible it says: "*Neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm I will spew you from my mouth,*" You can be hot and angry, and still do it, just to get the darn thing done. But, at least God fulfilled the covenant by getting Parker to do it. Maybe you are cold, and Maddie just doesn't feel like doing it; but it's easier just to get it done and off her mind, so she doesn't have to feel guilty, and she does it. At least it got done. But lukewarm, oh! That's me: "I might get it done. If I get far enough down my list, maybe I will find time and go help." "Oh, I forgot." And they were never helped by God, because I couldn't get off my rear end. I couldn't put out my hand, or my feet, or my voice to help. God didn't drop them, I did. *That's* how the covenant takes place. That's what God does, and God is continually trying - and [is] frustrated every single day, because we just don't quite get it done.

So, I was trying to figure out how do we help other people and make it successfully work out? How do we get closer to the heart by developing a way that cares for other people? And, I looked at a book. It's a wonderful book. It was written in 1974 and it is still around, so it has to be pretty darn good. It was written by Dr. Richard Sennett. This 1974 seminal work was entitled "The Fall of Public Man." Don't freak out about the exclusive language. He was a product of his time and "man" was the way we called it in 1974.

What he [Dr. Sennett] wrote about was the decline of the public person. In other words, we have become so privatized that we can't see beyond our needs. And what Dr. Sennett said has really come true. And, if you don't believe me, go to anyone who has been involved in a Lion's Club, a Rotary Club, a Kiwanis Club - or even a church.

My home church when I was growing up, in Hibbing, Minnesota, where I spent three years of high school, was [at] about, maybe 800 members when I was in high school. They are at 94 today. My first church - I was really proud of them; they have stayed solid. My second church, when I was there as a student, was at 900. When I was their pastor, when I got there, was 400 and it was a little more than that when I left; and, now they are 56. My last church, that I was just in, when I left, it dropped 400 members - 200 in the last year.

Wow! In part there are many reasons why these things happen. You can probably look at the churches you grew up in but, by and large, it is much harder now to get people out of their homes and into public life, and that is what a church is: it is living a public life. It's being responsible for more than just yourself - and we are not doing it well. So, many people in the academic world realized this - this book was so profound that two years later they already needed to reprint it, so it had its last reprinting in 1976, until the last few

months, when it was reprinted at the end of 2017 - because we are still not learning how to be public beings.

So, he said, we have become so isolated from our private homes to our work, our hospitals and our schools, are so self-contained that we cannot see beyond ourselves. We have become so segregated and siloed as communities.

But when he [Dr. Sennett] reprinted this book, just a few months ago, he wrote a new epilogue, because the old book had a couple of reasons why it didn't work out. One, he said, in 1974 there were a few reasons why the public was declining, but by 2017 there were different reasons why we were no longer public. He said, there were two. One was that we have become a public sphere online. Computers have kept us isolated and he used this example: He said, "Originally, we thought computers were going to set us free; we could communicate all over the world."

I remember back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I was doing "Shareware." OK, if you are over 50 you remember Shareware; if you are 35 and younger you are going, "What?" The internet originally had this utopian idea that we could share everything. It was the one place where everything could be free - both financially and experientially free - and you could share everything. Then, if you decided to get something called Shareware, it might help you do your checkbook. If you liked it and used it, you were on the honor system, and then you would pay that person for that software. If you decided you didn't [want to] use it, or didn't like it after a few months, you just wouldn't pay at all. It was just on the honor system.

Well, there is not a lot of honor in this world, so Shareware didn't last. But, along with that dream, something else died. It was the idea that social media is something that could expand our relationships beyond our borders. (In some ways it has. I think we have become a much smaller world because of it. We can speak and be more global.) But in another way, there were unintended consequences.

MIT's (Massachusetts Institute of Technology's) professor Sherry Turkle, said she embraced online life, until she started seeing the first studies coming back, saying how social media [has] isolated children. Evgeny Morosov and Nicholas Carr documented that cognitive impairments produced by Snapchat and Instagrams of reality [have] warped human beings. They confirmed that social media is not set up for time intensive cognition. Do you know what that means? Very easy. You just shorten it into other words: shorten attention span. Shorten attention spans to the point that people can't even have conversations together that are more than 160 characters. The other decline of the public person is the growing disparity between the wealthy and the poor, and that has also been exacerbated many times over between 1974 and 2017. We have nothing in common depending on our socio-economic level.

When you have such a difference in disparity by income you lose empathy for those who are so different from you, and it is harder to get closer to the heart. To be a covenant people means to live where all people have dignity and integrity, respect and dignity. To be a covenant people means to have appropriate technology without becoming isolated by it and allowing it to become an idol.

Finally, being a covenant people means finding ways of reaching out to the less fortunate, not with charity alone, but with compassion and relationship. That's why Family Promise *lives* here rather than somewhere else, so that they can live *with* us. I still love Ken Arentson's story about him coming into church one day, and a little boy runs up to him, and says, "What are you doing here?" Ken says, "I work here." And, he [Ken] asks, "What are you doing here?" The little boy said, "I *live* here."

That is relationship. That is a covenant between this congregation and those families saying, "We will care for you until you can care for yourself. And, no matter what happens, we will do our very best to provide." And, when we say that, that isn't just a covenant between Westminster Presbyterian Church and those families - it is a contract, a covenant that is actually between God and those families. We are just the conduit - *that* is the covenant.

It is a Ministry of Presence. And, I pray that we can continue to get "closer to the heart," which means getting together, and sitting down, and actually having conversations - without phones - just together and watching that covenant grow.

It is one that God wants and is crying out for. And God will continue to use "heathens" like Parker, and Maddie [laughter], and me. And, watch how God blesses and restores us now and always. Amen.