

Faith Mennonite Church
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Phil Stoltzfus

A Community of Promise

Deuteronomy 7:7-9; Ecclesiastes 5:4-5; Matthew 21:28-31a; Matthew 5:33-37

“I promise.” Two simple words. But when they are spoken, they set in motion a wonderfully complex and rich human dynamic. That is our theme for today—making and keeping promises—one of four key practices for sustaining community we are exploring in our series leading up to the fall retreat in October. Last week we looked at expressing gratitude, next week will be truthfulness, the week after, hospitality.

So why focus on promising? What is so important about it? Just think of all the formal ways that we make promises among ourselves—contracts are very prevalent in our society, covenants—more long-term, vows at weddings and in religious orders, secular oaths, systems of law. And there are so many types of informal “promises” hidden within the fabric of our everyday manners, implicit habits, and nonverbal forms of communication, within the ordinary rhythm of expressing appropriate ethical behavior and commitments, and within our larger sense of a moral and just universe. Christine Pohl, in *Living into Community*, writes, “Promises provide the internal framework for every relationship and every community...” (63) Without promises, community would be impossible. The flourishing of human life that happens in the context of relationship-building would be lost.

That’s why there are so many ways that promises are built into community life in our tradition. Baptism and communion remind us of something in the past that God has done that we commit to, and that can sustain us together in solidarity into the future. Coming to Sunday morning worship entails a type of promise to one another—how would it feel if you came to church one Sunday and no one else bothered to show up? The Community of St. Martin has a yearly service of recommitment to a life of nonviolence. Communal meals, visiting one other, acting in the community together—all of these can be ways in which we strengthen the bonds of promise together and realize the presence of God among us.

But precisely for that reason, promises can get us into trouble. Unlike expressing gratitude, making and keeping promises can be hard and complicated...and dangerous. They can lead to a breakdown of community pretty quickly. If trust is damaged, it can trigger the fear that our whole future is changed and our hopes and dreams tragically put in jeopardy. Pohl writes that our culture celebrates not fidelity, but the value of keeping one’s options open, of fostering a distrust of long-term commitments and institutions—because you need to be ready when something better, more valuable, more efficient, may be just around the corner. With this consumer mentality, the congregation then becomes something I “buy into,” right? I expect to get something for my “investment,” right? To fulfill a particular “need” that I have, right? And if it fails to deliver, then I can just go find a better one, right?

Now of course, there are times when breaking a promise might be a healthy and appropriate thing to do—to release each other from a promise that’s been made—perhaps to a project that has ripened or run its course, or to a person, group, or institution whose behavior has become unjust, abusive, impossible to sustain, or perhaps a bad fit. But knowing *when* it is wise to break a promise is a necessary part of the *larger* wisdom of living a life of promise, of integrity, of fidelity in the first place.

So, what does good promise-making and keeping look like? The language of promise is a really fascinating form of speech. To illustrate this I invite you to say two sentences after me:

1. **I'm listening to you!**
2. **I promise to listen to you!**

The first sentence is a description, and observation. It's a statement about the way the world is, or the way you are in the world based upon your personal authority. Another person can then evaluate your claim in the moment as right or wrong—true or false. It's a simple, one-dimensional way of relating. By default we treat nearly all of our communication that way. But the second one, the “I promise to listen to you,” is not the same. It's not just describing something. As a promise, *it enacts itself when it's spoken*. It performs its own authenticity by propelling a new intention, a new reality, right into the air of this room, and into our future. An authentic promise, we might say, does three things:

- 1) It takes place over a period of time. It's a temporal action, and the evaluation of its truth or effectiveness can only happen later. Like music, promises only exist over time.
- 2) It is inherently relational. Most promises (unless it's a personal vow) involve persons entering into some sort of mutual agreement, or at the very least there is a *promisee*, who is expected to acknowledge, to hold to account, and to express gratitude toward the promiser. Promises, then, are the building blocks of healthy mutuality in community.
- 3) It changes the world. “I'm listening to you” is an attempt to describe or understand the world. “I promise to listen to you” sets in motion a series of new actions which will make our community different than it was previously. Like expressions of forgiveness or gratitude, in the saying of “I promise” *you begin to enact another possible world*.

The biblical storyline is shaped throughout by promises: God's everlasting covenant with Noah and all the people's of the earth. The covenant with Abraham and Sarah, their descendants, and the nations of the world. The covenant of law at Mt. Sinai with Moses. The covenant with David and the the Davidic monarchy. The new covenant of the prophet Jeremiah in which the law will be found not in stone, temple, or king, but written “on our hearts” (31:33). The promise of salvation and redemption through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The promise of the Holy Spirit through the church.

This first passage in Deuteronomy offers us a good illustration of how the *Mosaic* promise functions. God is faithful through time, to the ten thousandth generation! God establishes a relationship with a people—sometimes, as with Noah and Abraham, it is an unconditional promise, whereas here it's conditional upon the people responding to God's love by maintaining fidelity to the Torah. This is a bi-directional, *relational* promise. And finally, God's promise is not hypothetical or merely spiritual, it does work to change the world—by freeing slaves, granting a promised land, promising return from Exile, promising to love us into the future.

Then in Ecclesiastes we find this nugget of wisdom literature—a proverb, really—which translates divine promise into the human sphere. Fulfilling a vow—keeping it and carrying it out—is more important than making it in the first place. It would be better for you not to make the promise at all than to use your words carelessly and inauthentically and set in motion a promise that you're going to fail to enact, anyway.

Jesus uses this same argument, turning it into a parable when speaking to the chief priests and elders in the temple during the last week of his life. In a twist so characteristic of him, Jesus lifts up as exemplary the person you don't expect—the very one that does *not* make the vow, does not, like the other son, spill out words of promise that they don't mean or that they don't intend to carry out. No, it is the first son who actually *does* the work and fulfills the “vow.” So, the implication is, it is not the religious leaders, not the spiritual heroes in our midst, with all the right words and rituals, who will be representatives of the

kingdom. No, it's the ones who are seen initially as not very articulate, not having the right "beliefs," not very "righteous." It is they who are the ones who may very well prove to be, through their *actions*, authentic builders of the kingdom coming.

In our final passage, really the central teaching on promising in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turns everything all the way upside-down. Don't even swear oaths, he says! Let your everyday language, your everyday life, naturally be one of truthfulness, fidelity, and promise. Forced promising *statements* won't build the kingdom. What it takes is a nonviolent, voluntary promising *style* of speaking and living demonstrated through time.

This was one of the central passages for the sixteenth-century Anabaptists, many of whom would refuse to swear a civil loyalty oath, at times at great expense to them. In the *Martyr's Mirror* a story is told of a Belgian Mennonite, Lenaert Plover, who refused to swear a civil oath related to his cloth appraising business. Subsequently, in the year 1560, he was arrested in Antwerp for his Anabaptist beliefs and executed.

A promise, the Anabaptists said, can become an idol. An oath, especially when using God-language, is theologically suspect because it sounds as if you're attempting to call down God to bless your own projects—that you're trying to manipulate divine power for your own purposes. A civil oath, likewise, can be a problem if it binds us in loyalty to a political system or military program that goes against the promise of Jesus. And ordinary promises we make to each other can likewise become oppressive if we unthinkingly or habitually treat them as some sort of business contract—some sort of "agreement *thing*" that we can then hold over each other's heads.

How then can we live lives of promise with each other in a healthy way? Let's try a third sentence to repeat back:

We promise to listen to each other!

In Christian community, our promises are not descriptions of some "thing" or some market-like contractual agreements between two parties. They are qualities of the multi-dimensional fabric of our life together. We here at Faith have so many connections and commitments with each other that overlap with one another in an interlocking and beautiful web that make up who we are as a congregation. And it all adds up to be greater than the sum of its parts. Our little promises build us up, when we say, "We promise to listen to each other," into a radically new emergent organism—a promising new reality.

Our life together is not just a set of contractual promises, made and broken over time, but a community of promise—God's community. A community that lives the promise and enacts the promise of new life in Jesus Christ. A community that lives not by the letter alone, but by the Spirit. A community that, through our promise-filled living, creates the sinews and nerves and muscles and bone structure of the body of Christ in the world, and sets that body in motion in amazing ways that have never been seen or experienced ever before.

That is God's promise for us today, the promise of liberation, the promise of discipleship, the promise of new life in the Spirit of the living God. May we accept the invitation and the challenge to live into that promise in the year ahead. Amen.