

“I Am Third”
St. Paul’s United Church of Christ
March 7, 2021

Friends in Christ, we are now at the third Sunday of Lent.

The title of my message this morning is “I Am Third.” This comes from the title of a book written by Gail Sayers who was one of the best running backs ever to play in the NFL who played for the Chicago Bears until he blew out a knee. The book was an autobiography in which he wrote that in his life, God came first, then others came second, and finally that he came third. He recognized that God had made covenants with all of us. The Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, contains many covenants that God made with humankind.

So what is a covenant? David W. Johnson writes in the January 18, 2021 issue of the Presbyterian Outlook the following:

“A covenant is a formal agreement between parties. It can have a purely secular meaning, as an agreement between individuals or groups to do or accomplish something. In this sense, a covenant is something like a contract or a treaty. In a biblical context, a covenant is an agreement between God and a created entity. Covenants in the Old Testament have two forms. One is conditional; it has the form of “if.” One such example is found in Exodus 19:5, which forms a kind of prelude to the giving of the law. ‘Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.’ Violation of the terms of the covenant results in punishment.

The other form of covenant is unconditional. Such covenants simply express what God intends to do. The covenant with Noah is an example: “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” (Genesis 9:11) There is no “if” attached to this covenant. It is God’s promise to all living creatures.”

That is the first covenant that God makes as we read the book of Genesis. Note that it is not limited to humans, but to all living creatures. The rainbow is described as a remembrance to God of the covenant.

The next covenant found in Genesis is between God and Abraham. God calls Abraham to move to the Promised Land and will make him the father of a great nation whose number will be as great as there are stars in the sky. This can be viewed as the spiritual father, and that includes us today.

Then God continues the covenant with Abraham’s son Isaac, and then Isaac’s son Jacob. Then we have Joseph, the eleventh of twelve sons of Jacob. He was hated by his older brothers and was sold into slavery in Egypt. God was with him even though he was in a foreign country and after numerous setbacks, he

became the second most powerful person next to the Pharaoh after leading the country through seven years of plenty and bountiful harvests followed by seven years of drought and famine. Joseph eventually got his family to move to the northern province of Goshen in the Nile delta. The Hebrews prospered and finally a Pharaoh, being concerned about them, forced them into slavery.

The Bible tells us that they were in slavery for some 400 years and that God finally responded to the cries for help by calling Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to “let my people go.” After a series of plagues, Pharaoh relented and let them go. But as the Hebrews were leaving, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his soldiers after them. God saved the Hebrews by making it possible for them to cross the Red Sea on dry land and into the Sinai Peninsula. God provided good water from out of a rock, provided manna for them, and quails so that they could have meat. All the time they were heading for Mount Sinai.

While camped at Mount Sinai, God called Moses to go to the top of the mountain where God gave him the Decalogue (also known as the Ten Commandments). This is from the Common English Bible, a fairly recent translation in modern English:

Scripture Exodus 10:1-17 (CEB)

10 Then God spoke all these words:

²I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

³You must have no other gods before^[a] me.

⁴Do not make an idol for yourself—no form whatsoever—of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the waters under the earth. ⁵Do not bow down to them or worship them, because I, the Lord your God, am a passionate God. I punish children for their parents' sins even to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me.⁶But I am loyal and gracious to the thousandth generation^[b]of those who love me and keep my commandments.

⁷Do not use the Lord your God's name as if it were of no significance; the Lord won't forgive anyone who uses his name that way.

⁸Remember the Sabbath day and treat it as holy. ⁹Six days you may work and do all your tasks, ¹⁰but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. Do not do any work on it—not you, your sons or daughters, your male or female servants, your animals, or the immigrant who is living with you. ¹¹Because the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and everything that is in them in six days, but rested on the seventh day. That is why the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹²Honor your father and your mother so that your life will be long on the fertile land that the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³ Do not kill.

¹⁴ Do not commit adultery.

¹⁵ Do not steal.

¹⁶ Do not testify falsely against your neighbor.

¹⁷ Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's house. Do not desire and try to take your neighbor's wife, male or female servant, ox, donkey, or anything else that belongs to your neighbor.

May God bless our hearing of his holy word. Amen.

Jesus, when asked "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?", the Gospel of Mark reports that Jesus answered, "He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment" before also referring to a second commandment, "And the second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

The Ten Commandments are God's part of the covenant with his people. As Jesus shows, the ten can be condensed into two major themes, to love God and to love others. If you love God, he will be the person's number one priority in life and treated with respect. The second part is what it means to live in community, not only to love your neighbor but respect your neighbor.

You may wonder, where do I fit in. First is God, then second is the neighbor, and then "I Am Third." We are to look out for others and pray for them. To live in community is an important part of living in God's kingdom. When one reads the Gospels, it is easy to notice that it was important to Jesus to restore persons (both women and men) back into community.

Perhaps you noticed that in the Decalogue, there are no punishments for coming up short. After all, he is a God of love. God later made a new covenant with us when his son Jesus to earth where he ministered and finally went to the cross taking the burden of our sins with him.

This brings us to the Gospel lesson for today.

The Gospel of John has a very different timeline than the other three gospels. In John, Jesus begins his ministry at the wedding in Cana by changing water into wine. In John 2, you will hear the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. In the other three gospels, this action is one of the last things that Jesus does before his passion. John, on the other hand, has it at the beginning. Hear now his account:

Gospel John 2:13-22 (CEB)

¹³ It was nearly time for the Jewish Passover, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ He found in the temple those who were selling cattle, sheep, and

doves, as well as those involved in exchanging currency sitting there.¹⁵ He made a whip from ropes and chased them all out of the temple, including the cattle and the sheep. He scattered the coins and overturned the tables of those who exchanged currency.¹⁶ He said to the dove sellers, "Get these things out of here! Don't make my Father's house a place of business."¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written, *Passion for your house consumes me.*

¹⁸ Then the Jewish leaders asked him, "By what authority are you doing these things? What miraculous sign will you show us?"

¹⁹ Jesus answered, "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up."

²⁰ The Jewish leaders replied, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and you will raise it up in three days?"²¹ But the temple Jesus was talking about was his body.²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

May God bless our hearing of his holy word. Amen.

The temple was God's home and a sacred space. The religious leaders, over many years, had corrupted it. Worship included the offering of sacrifices. Locals would bring their animals, but they were inspected and not pure enough so the worshiper would have to buy one of the temples at premium prices. Pilgrims would not have been able to bring animals with them so they had to purchase them. Offerings could only be made with temple coins, and guess who was there to exchange the Roman denarii for temple coins, at a premium, of course.

Jesus was setting the stage for worship, not to be at the temple, but wherever a believer was. He shocked the system. Now we can worship God wherever we are, whether in person or on-line. God does hear our prayers.

While there are several other covenants in the Bible, as we celebrate communion today, we are reminded that "this cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

God is first. Our neighbors are second. And I am third, and living under God's grace and love.

Thanks be to God. Amen.