

Pat Conover: Covenant and Community

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Seekers Church

Covenant and Community

I've been meaning to preach this sermon for a couple of years going back to a workshop with Walter Breuggeman. It starts in part from my concern that Seekers makes a lot of use of the word community. When Seekers was renaming itself a few years ago, I was one who spoke up for including the word community in our official name. Some of you know that I invested a big hunk of my thirties in the creation of an intentional Christian community in Greensboro, North Carolina named Shalom Community. So I clearly like the word community. ... And I am unsatisfied with it and hope to lure you into a similar dissatisfaction.

Community is not a biblical word, nor is it a biblical concept. The initial meaning of community is the people who live in the same place, a matter of location. People also now use the word without a reference to location, as in the "community of science fiction readers." Two of the good things about community as a locational word are that it is not about governmental control nor ownership, nor about tribal identity. It has a democratic and melting pot feel. I live in the Sligo Park Hills community and our organizational reality is a garden and civic club that publishes a very occasional newsletter and an even more occasional directory.

Community is a feel-good word, a little warmer than the word neighborhood, which is even more bound by its geographical

reference. Communities are made up of good neighbors, people who share some common interests; people who help each other out and kind of look after things.

Another thing I like about the word community is that it is distinctly non-bureaucratic, non-controlling. Joining or leaving a community is voluntary. We might not want to leave a good community but there is no obligation. Communities are made up of individuals and families who can afford to be there.

Sometimes I hear Seekers described as family with family also meant in a metaphorical feel-good way. There is a sense of a little more obligation in the word family, and a little more sense of tribe. Family has little more sense of boundaries and emotional ties. It is a more parochial word.

Seekers has some features that are not like community and family. In the standards for membership, in our strong commitments to inward and outward journeys, in our emphases on gifts and callings, stewardship, and in the ways worship lures us toward transcendence, we carry several truths that qualify the concept of community. This makes me feel better because one of my discomforts with the word community is that it is used a lot by the institutional church in the context of evangelism defined as membership growth. It is a very weak word in that context, having a feel of avoiding conflict and personal challenge.

As I move into the biblical part of this sermon I want you to understand that I think Seekers has some of the aspects of covenant and not merely of community. On the other hand, I hope that reflection on the meaning of covenant will qualify our understanding of community, will challenge any who want only the feel good qualities of community without a grounding in covenant.

One of the most fruitful paths to understanding the Bible is

to follow the development of a core idea over time, watching how a concept adds power as it is tested in different settings. Covenant is one of those core ideas, an idea more basic than liberation, kingdom or exile, an idea that gives direction in the midst of liberation, kingdom or exile. I am not using the lectionary this morning since no lectionary segment covers the sweep through scripture on the concept of covenant.

The oldest historical covenant is the covenant that Moses came to understand. In one sense the liberation of the Hebrew people from Egypt was just another rebellion against oppression. Given our human taste for oppression there have been a lot of rebellions. Two things set the Mosaic covenant apart. First of all is the marvelous statement of monotheism when Moses learns that the name of God is I AM. Despite all the parochial developments of covenant that followed, this great naming of God forever challenges selfishly construed covenants. The second great Mosaic contribution is the concept of law based on the underlying idea that God is not capricious or selfish, but just. To sense the weight and power of such an idea you might contrast the Mosaic vision with Greek myths.

Law, as an absolute concept, reduces patriarchal capriciousness. But law, as an absolute, may be dictated in the interest of oppression. It is the appeal from law to justice that makes law not absolute. The idea that justice flows from God means that any law can be evaluated and reconstructed. A primary statement of the Mosaic covenant is found in Exodus, chapters 21 to 23. It begins with the 10 commandments, a passage worth memorizing to this day. It also includes the following guidance for slavery. (Read 22: 2-6)

To start with, we don't like the concept of slavery. It is the opposite of individualism. A law that endorses slavery is a law that opposes freedom. But consider the way this Mosaic Law moderates an absolute slavery. One must only be a slave for 6 years and then one is free, quite a radical idea in that day

and time, an idea that would have greatly modified our own national history if the Bible-believing slave owners had taken it seriously. Furthermore, it creates a choice for the slave after the end of the six years. If he wants to stay united with his family, which belongs to the slave owner, he can submit to being a slave for life, a very hard choice but better than no choice at all. That is, Moses was humanizing a terrible human institution and sowing the seeds for its later elimination. But one needs a larger vision to see where God's revelation to Moses was headed, and about 4000 years of struggle. For starters, the Law of Moses on slavery was directed only to the Hebrew purchase of Hebrew slaves. This may have been realistic policymaking that fit the span of control that was then available to Hebrews, but it is in tension with the universal themes more apparent in the Ten Commandments.

The most basic thing to notice about the Mosaic covenant is that it was conditional. God will be with us as long as we are obedient. This simple idea created the great theological escape hatch for the times of exile. If things go against us then it must be because we were not obedient. That means we can have the life goal of struggling for obedience and purity that will give life meaning in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Two thousand years later, Paul thought this kind of advice was good advice for slaves as they waited for the end of the world.

The second covenant, historically, is the covenant with Abraham. Though told as a story that was lived out before Moses, the story was created after Moses. In the story God calls Abraham to go invade a foreign territory and capture it for his tribe. This was a great story, a great covenant for people in the wilderness, people who had escaped Egypt but didn't have the power to capture any of the important water sources. The wilderness tribes were stone-age people stuck as nomads while the riverain cultures were developing bronze and

iron, regular crops and orchard based agriculture. It is a very parochial covenant and a very patriarchal covenant. If you are part of the patriarch's tribe you must help fight for the land that will set you free from your nomadic poverty. It was a covenant that countenanced genocide, a covenant that justified slaughtering the leaders of foreign religions. It was great for creating a sense of family and forgetful of the universalism that Moses founded.

The Abrahamic covenant led logically to the triumphant covenant of God with David. In one telling, the Davidic covenant is unconditional. In II Samuel 7:16 God says to David, "Your family and your kingdom will be established forever in my sight." But Nathan nonetheless challenged David over his sin and the downfall of the Kings was blamed on injustice.

A thousand years later, the birth stories of Jesus imaginatively trace his lineage to David, suggesting that he is a political threat to the Roman Empire. Whatever hopes there were of political revolution among the followers of Jesus were dashed with Rome's genocide against Jerusalem. And the political zealots were blamed for betraying Jesus by naming Judas Iscariot, Judas the carrier of a sword, as the betrayer. The story of Jesus healing the ear of the priest's servant after the sword fight at the time of his arrest, was a story of renouncing violence that was necessary for survival after all hopes of political power were lost.

Jesus' most authentic words speak of a very different kind of covenant, a covenant in which the greatest shall be servants. Such a vision picks up on secondary themes in Hebrew scripture, themes developed in Deutero-Isaiah, Jonah, and Job during the time of exile. The covenant announced by Jesus is unconditional and loving. Obedience and sacrifice cannot earn it. Disobedience doesn't lead God to special acts of punishment, but is punishment simply because one is alienated from the love and forgiveness of God. It is a covenant that

points more directly to the universal theme of justice that undergirds the law and tempers justice with mercy. It is definitely NOT family oriented and Jesus challenged the families of his day as instruments of oppression. It responds to people based on their need and not on their lineage. Over 2000 years, with a lot of progress in the last 200 years, the good news covenant of Jesus has led us to challenge slavery, patriarchy, homophobia and discrimination against the disabled. I'm doing my best to follow such leading in challenging discrimination against transgender people.

I wonder if Seekers really wants to be part of the unfolding covenant that I have so oversimplified? Does Seekers want to place itself within the Judeo-Christian story that has been growing over the last 4000 years? Are we finding our place in a great story or do we think we have started from scratch and that we are making it all up as we go along.

Maybe we just want to be family, gathering with people like each other and rationalizing our privilege and power. Maybe we want to be only community, exercising our freedom to choose when we want to participate, finding friends, helping each other out, enjoying the wonderful gifts of art that are such a rich part of our worship. Maybe we think we can get by on the cheap, taking out what works for each of us with little thought to self-giving investment of life and treasure.

Is Seekers interested in purpose and direction? Is Seekers into giving away our lives and resources, of planting the palm trees and vines which will give fruit long after we have passed by? Is Seekers into the harder questions?

Though I began developing this sermon in a season before we re-engaged our search for a new home, I find I can't finish without noting the implications of covenant for such a search. The concept of covenant, developing since the late Stone Age times of Moses, provides a much richer context for our search than the more transient concept of community.

Our church is what we make of it, but that is only the first half of the truth. Our church is also a great gift we never earned. We trace back through the gifts of the Church of the Savior, gifts that were never named for us, but gifts nonetheless. We trace back through the roots of each of us with a Judeo-Christian upbringing. Much as we are joined by our mutual recognition of the limitations of our specific heritages, we need to remember that we have found each other, in part, because we were prepared by our rebellions to look for what is truly needed. Learning that each of us is hungry has helped us turn to each other to ask where the bread is.

Do you think that investing yourself in love and justice is optional? Do you think you can opt in and out of the appreciation of God, of serving God with your life? Do you think that becoming a Christian is a matter of choice? As long as you are sitting around estimating the costs and benefits of becoming a Christian you are acting as if you are God. Becoming a Christian is a matter of appreciation. Christian worship is about worth-ship, about what is worth your deepest attention.

So it is with our search for a new home. If all we are doing is attending to the important costs and benefits of various alternatives, we are not attending to the fullness of God. The first awareness we need is that we want to be at home with each other, need to claim a space so that we can be with each other. The covenant point is that being together is not an end in itself, a point we can lose track of if we are only talking about community.

All the great church institutions are like Ebenezers in the wilderness, towering witnesses to where we have been. They give us a sense of direction because there was something of life in each of them, whatever their other limitations. So this building will soon be an Ebenezer for us, both the building and the memories of the first generations who found worth here. Ebenezers are most helpful when they are firmly

behind us. They give us a sense of direction, a sense of what is possible, a sense of the covenant. Our next home will, in its own day, become another Ebenezer. If we do our best it will be a beautiful memory, part of a larger memory that helped us get so far. But the memory will be in the hands and hearts of people we do not know, people we cannot control.

Perhaps the best way to understand the step from community to covenant is to name it as the step from freedom-from to freedom-for. Some of us have worked very hard to claim our freedom from different histories and oppressions. We value the inner life in Seekers. But then it comes time to breathe out, to invest our hard won freedom in something worthwhile, something worth all the inner work. *We can shape our community* to please us, and we should do that. *Covenant shapes us*, gives us direction, and calls us to next steps. When we appreciate the preciousness of what is happening in our midst it will be easy to move because we will want the best possible place to gather again. Investing together, sacrificing together to claim a new home, is not a cost of community, it is a privilege of covenant.