

THIS HOLY UNION
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Based on Exodus 19 – 20. Consummating The Sinai Covenant

How do we live in loving community with God and one another through the wilderness of life?

That is the question that religion – at its best – is trying to answer.

Some religions answer it with rituals. Some with a particular set of practices. Some with a comprehensive set of belief systems. Some with a series of rules to follow.

At our worst, religion *becomes* the ritual or the practice or the belief or the rule. And we get so caught up in doing it “right” – and better than everyone else! – that we forget the whole point behind it all.

But no matter the ritual or the practice or the belief or the rule, the bottom line is still the same. We are all trying – at our best – to live in loving community with God and one another through the wilderness of life. Including the Christian tradition, in which we have all of the above.

Including right here in the Sacrament of Communion. Where we come from north and south and east and west to celebrate a meal of abundant life. To confess we are sick with the sin and the suffering and the violence of our world. And we want to be made well, we want to be made whole, we want to be made one with our broken yet resurrected Christ. We want to be made one with God.

One of the great metaphors for communion is to see it as “a great wedding feast.” Reminding us of the values we share at the core of our covenant with Christ and, in turn, our covenant with one another. A covenant that is not so very different from the vows two people make when they stand “before God and these witnesses” to unite their lives “in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; for as long as we both shall live.”

Values of partnership and commitment, of fidelity and trust, of intimacy and shared purpose, of perseverance and hope.

Values of faith.

The great wedding feast of the Sacrament reminds us of the covenant union God has already made with us and that we have already made with God, from a time long before our time, from a mountain in a wilderness most of us will never see, where our Old Testament lesson this morning takes place.

Moses on the Mountain of Sinai

From that mountain God has heard the cries of a suffering people and has led them out of bondage. From that mountain the God who has a vision for a new life of promise and plenty together with these people leads them onward to an old ancestral land. From that mountain the God who is just beginning to become re-acquainted with this precious community invites them to rest and simply spend some time together before moving forward with a whole new commitment.

I would go so far as to call it a “holy union,” this covenant that takes place between God and God’s people at this mountain in the wilderness of the Exodus. Even the prophets call it a “marriage” much later in the Old Testament texts: a marriage between God and God’s people, right here with Moses on Mount Sinai, with covenant vows of steadfast love to express the mutual loyalty—the *hesed*—between God and God’s people—between God and *us* – “for as long as we all shall live.”

The great wedding feast that is the Sacrament of this holy union—this sacred marriage—between God and God’s people is for us, too—for the Gentiles, too—for *anyone* who would come to the feast and be fed. No matter who we are. No matter what we have done. No matter what we have left undone. No matter what has been done to us.

This table of grace is something like a renewal of *our* covenant promises in return—the ones we call “The Ten Commandments.” The first four of which focus our fidelity to a God of justice and liberation. The last six of which focus our fidelity to the people with whom we have been bound in God.

We could, of course, paraphrase these Ten Commandments—these “holy vows”—with one Great Commandment, and a second, which is like it, (which is what Jesus did, after all): “to love the Holy One, our God, with all our heart, mind, soul and strength . . . and to love our neighbor as ourself.”

And we could throw rice and blow bubbles and decorate our cars and all live happily ever after! Right?

Well ...

The problem is, as everyone who has taken these very human vows knows, we just can’t seem to get it right. At least not all the time. Maybe not even most of the time. With God *or* with one another.

For example, how many of us can honestly say we have forsaken all other gods?

And no, I am not talking about honoring the wisdom of other world religions. I am talking about where we place our loyalty. Where we place our trust. I am talking about the stock market. Or the Clinique counter. Or our increasingly elusive job security. Or the ability of our National Guard to put down an insurrection at the Capitol.

Let’s be honest. *Those* are the places we put our trust. At least I do. Not the God of the Bible who literally says, “I am who I am.” Meaning the moment you try to pin me down is the moment you have completely missed the point.

How many of us can honestly say our loyalty and trust is in *that* God? It is really, really hard!

And no, I am not suggesting we divest of our mutual funds or our makeup or our jobs, and definitely not our National Guard. I am simply saying we should be honest about where we find our identity and our security. We should be honest about the ways we make the God we worship into our own image, rather than the other way around. And we should be honest about the ways this idolatry leads to chaos in our communion with God and one another.

Speaking of one another, how many of us can honestly say we have truly loved our neighbor as our self? Let’s face it, if you are anything like me you covet just about *everything* your neighbor has. Even Jimmy Carter “lusted in his heart,” after all!

And even the easy vow—the one about honoring the Sabbath—*the one that actually begs us not to work!*—can be the hardest commitment to keep, at least in this global, integrated, COVID-recession economy. Our yoga instructors tell us the same thing: *savasana* is the hardest yoga pose there is; the one that requires us to *rest*.

The truth is, we are not good at honoring our covenant vows, with God or with one another.

And God knows it. And Jesus knows it.

The truth is, what Jesus is trying to do throughout his ministry is shake up the people who think they have already done just fine by God and by God's people, thank you very much. Who think they are following the rules and implementing the practices and holding the beliefs but still perpetuate a religion that hoards power and privilege and resources at the expense of the poor.

The truth is what Jesus is trying to do throughout his ministry is return the religious and political elite to the vows they have taken in holy union with "the least of these." To shake up those who think they have no need of grace. Who care little for the hungry, lonely, naked, or sick. Who really only care about themselves.

The apostle Paul puts it a bit more gently: "God has chosen you and made you holy people." Not to the exclusion of all the other people and all the other religious traditions. But as a treasured blessing. As an act of love for all who find themselves too often unloved.

And because God loves you so much and treasures you so much, Paul says, "So you should always ... bear with each other, and forgive each other." We call it "mutual forbearance" in the Presbyterian tradition. Just keep working through your differences. Don't quit, don't give up, keep on with God and one another. "Even more than all this," Paul says, "clothe yourself in love. Love is what holds you all together in perfect unity" (Col 3:12-14).

Kind of like a wedding.

In the end it is simply a choice we make, day after day, year after year, this holy union with God and one another, where we keep on trying and failing and trying again to live in loving community. We just decide we want it badly enough to keep on trying.

So we come to the feast. "The great wedding banquet" of our Sacrament of Communion. To renew our vows in holy union with God and one another. And, believe it or not, with Judas and Peter – the betrayer and the denier – and everyone else who fails utterly to live our covenant promises completely.

And we say we want this marriage all over again.

Right here, right now, God offers us all the invitation: *I love you; even now. I still want to be your God. Do you still want to be my people?* And we get to say, *I do.*