

BOUND BY A COVENANT
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November 16, 2014
33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Genesis 12:1-2

Now the Lord said to Abram and Sarah, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

1 Corinthians 12.27

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Psalm 133

Behold, how good and pleasant it is
when brothers and sisters dwell in unity!

It is like vistas seen from atop
a mountain one has climbed...
Or like the stillness of a sunset after
a long day's work.

It is like a shimmering rainbow,
breaking through a summer rain.
When men and women dwell in harmony,
the star of Truth appears!

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Even before Greg Lloyds's death Thursday morning, I had decided to set aside the appointed lessons for this Sunday—they weren't very interesting anyway. So I chose other lessons and Psalm for this Sunday because I wanted to talk about the meaning of church membership. For today and next Sunday we are welcoming 16 new members into our household of faith. And today that subject is even more fitting since over the past three months this community of faith has done for Greg and Mary Ellen what any church worth its salt does.

In sickness and health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow we are there for each other and our children.

There's more to being a church than that. But it starts there. We are servants of love for one another. In that regard it is like the covenant of marriage: a promise to be with one other person through thick and thin.

In this community of faith we are bound by a sacred covenant to love God and others wholeheartedly. And so we walk with each other to build the land that God has planned where love shines through.

This covenant binds us to the promise and hope held in the heart of our Great Ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, a promise that a way could be found to bless all families and nations of the whole earth. That promise, we believe, was fully embodied in Jesus who is the heart and radiating energy of our tradition.

And so we serve the world in the way and in the spirit of Jesus. And we care for each other in that same spirit.

*I will hold the Christ light for you
in the night time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.*

In case you hadn't heard, after feeling poorly much of this year, Greg received a grim diagnosis at the end of July. Advanced pancreatic cancer. No cure. Only a few months to live. Maybe twelve. Possibly less.

None of us, including Greg, could fathom mortality that close and that personal. What do you do when mortality is staring you in the face? Well, if you can, you do what you always do: you stay in the moment. You breathe deep and keep living life to the hilt, living life for all it's worth.

And so Mary Ellen and Greg threw a party in September. A boatload of friends and neighbors crowded into their small back yard on a Sunday afternoon. It looked like it might rain but a wind arose and blew those clouds away to make room for sunshine.

Greg strapped on his guitar, stood on the deck and while other musicians stepped in and out of multiple sets Greg sang on and on and on for nearly six straight hours through virtually every single set, as radiant as Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. It was a time of grace. A moment never to be forgotten.

Greg was a classically trained musician. He loved music—the “Grateful Dead” music especially but he really loved all kinds of music, including church music, high and low.

Greg sang in our choir and with the Psalm Singers. He sang at all our Earthfests and Peacefests. And often by himself he would lead us in singing *Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, blow through the wilderness calling and free.*

He led us in singing *When a poor one who has nothing shares with strangers, when the crippled in their weakness strengthen others, then we know that God still goes that road with us.*

He led us in singing *When we are living it is in Christ Jesus and when we're dying it is in the Lord, both in our living and in our dying, we belong to God, we belong to God.* (Hymn 400)

Greg first led that song about 15 years ago. Afterwards, he told me he hated that song. Don't ask me again, he said. But I forgot and asked him again. And he led it again and afterwards he told me that he once hated that song but now he loved it. He'd be happy to lead it again anytime.

When we are living it is in Christ Jesus and when we're dying it is in the Lord, both in our living and in our dying, we belong to God, we belong to God.

This past August Michael Wisniewski asked Greg to sing with him, Jade and Morgan on November 2nd not knowing it would be the last song Greg would sing for us. It was a song they'd never sung before and Greg had come to love it.

That Sunday morning, just two weeks ago, Greg could barely stand or barely walk. But he told Mary Ellen that morning he wanted to go to church no matter what. He had a song to sing.

And so there he stood—with a little help from his friends—on All Saints Sunday, leaning on Jade and Morgan, singing his assigned verse with every ounce left in his body.

*O how sweet to walk in this pilgrim way,
leaning on the everlasting arms;
O how bright the path grows from day to day,
leaning on the everlasting arms.*

And then we all sang the refrain or tried to.

*Leaning, leaning,
safe and secure from all alarms.
Leaning, leaning,
Leaning on the everlasting arms.*

Greg shuffled slowly back to his pew with the biggest smile I've ever seen on his face. Joy radiating. And over the next hour that joy would grow deeper and deeper as one member after another came to thank him and wish him well.

He took it all in. One word, one touch, one hug at a time. Receiving and returning one valedictorian blessing after another.

On my way out of church that Sunday I walked through the Fellowship Hall, which looked deserted and suddenly noticed Greg slouched on the sofa in the corner. Terry Tucker was sitting beside him. I went over and cheerfully said: *You look terrible.* To which he said with a weak smile and a whisper: *I am totally exhausted. But I've never been happier.*

Belonging to a church may mean many things but it's more or less just this: a promise, a promise to be with and for a certain community of people come hell or high water. And that makes it a lot like marriage, which is also a covenant, a sacred promise to be with and for one other person through thick and thin.

Before I officiate a wedding I tell the couple that the wedding is not the marriage. The marrying of two persons begins before the wedding and will continue long after. Marrying is a process not a finished product. "To marry" literally means to link or fuse two things that naturally don't belong to each other.

And so two people who were attracted to each other by chance or by match.com, attracted perhaps by something superficial or something profound, who have fallen in love, grown in friendship and maybe even lived together under the same roof for awhile now want something more: they want to celebrate publicly before family and friends what they have discovered to be true privately. They have found a good match, not perfect, but good enough. A suitable partner. Someone who makes them more than they are alone.

And thus a wedding is announced. Family and friends gather to witness the solemn promises of faithfulness. No, you are not perfect; nor am I, they say to each other. But I am more than willing to join my life with yours. And so before family and friends I solemnly promise to walk with you as far as the road may take us.

And when you think about, that's what we've witnessed today. Several persons who fell in love with this place, its people, its values, and its vision have found a good match for them and have publicly declared it so: I want to walk with you, to learn the way of love with you and to care for each other and our children in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow as far and as long as this road may take us.

Being a member of a church may mean many different things. But it's more or less just this: a promise to be together as one body, like members of our own body that simply can't live as well alone as they can together in harmony.

When one member rejoices, we all rejoice. When one suffers, we all suffer.

*I will weep when you are weeping;
when you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow*

'til we've seen this journey through.
[from "The Servant Song"]