

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT | FEBRUARY 28, 2021

GENESIS 17:1-7, 15-16 | PSALM 22:23-31 | ROMANS 4:13-25 | MARK 8:31-39

We're continuing on this week in a series of homilies on the meaning of the Eucharist. And today, we're presented with the story of God's covenant to Abraham and Sarah.

When we think of covenants, we usually think of an agreement two parties make that benefits everyone involved. A marriage is a covenant two people make that's, hopefully, mutually beneficial. If you take out a loan, you might sign a financial covenant where you agree to the terms. This is what I'm getting, this is how I'll pay it back. I spent Tuesday night on a call about a board covenant. People agree to a set of expectations and norms to make the most of everyone's time. Entering into a covenant restricts some of your options, but you do it because it makes your life better.¹

But one of the things that's interesting about this covenant made to Abraham and Sarah is that it doesn't directly and immediately benefit them. This isn't like last week's covenant where God agrees not to flood the face of the earth again. That's obviously going to be good for Noah. It isn't like the covenant God makes with Moses and the Israelites we'll hear about next week, either. That covenant is good for Moses.

But the covenant with Abraham and Sarah is different. Think for a minute about what exactly is in this covenant. God promises them the land of Canaan. But their residency there is never secure. And God promises them descendants. But they'll never get to meet most of them, either. It's a covenant made with Abraham and Sarah, but it's a covenant that's formed largely for the sake of others.

And there's a dynamic emerging here that's super important if you want to understand Lutheran theology. When God makes a promise, when God makes a covenant, it never ends with the recipient. It's never simply, God does this for me, and I do this for God. God gives me the grace, I give God the thanks and praise, and that's the end of the transaction.

But God's promises radiate out. They involve more and more people. If you've been to a baptism here, you've probably noticed that the rite doesn't end with the assembly saying, "You were just joined to the body of Christ. Good for you. That's got to be really nice for you." It ends when the assembly says, "Join us in... bearing God's creative redeeming word to all the world!"² Which gets at exactly why the baptismal covenant and all God's covenants are so important. Because other people depend on the promises God makes to you.

The way I've explained this dynamic in an excessive number of homilies is that God is "for us so that." God is "for us." "For us" means that God takes an interest in our lives and desires our flourishing. But God is always "for us so that." "So that" means that our relationship with God is never a private thing hermetically sealed off from the rest of the world, but it always radiates outward.

Today's reading from Genesis is a good example of that dynamic. God's promise is for Abraham and Sarah. But it's not just for them. It's so that more people might be grafted into the divine life.³ People like Isaac and Jacob, Jesus and Mary, you and me. When you read the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, it would be fair to ask who exactly is benefitting from this arrangement. Until you remember who's reading it.

And that brings us back to the Eucharist. Because the promise God makes to is in the Eucharist is like the one made to Abraham and Sarah. "For us so that." When you receive the Eucharist, the words you hear are *The body of Christ given for you*. For you. Not *The body of Christ is here already and if you happen to want some, that's, like, fine*. But the body of Christ is given *for you* in particular. When Jesus says, *This is my body*, he means that his body is present *for you*.

¹ Obligatory caveat here that covenants don't make life better for everyone.

² This is part of why baptisms are public events in our tradition, and we don't do them privately in people's backyards.

³ If we read the Romans passage from today, you'd see this is basically the argument St. Paul makes.

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And it's given to you so that you can serve others as the body of Christ does. You've probably noticed that our post-communion prayers use all kinds of different language, but they always have a public-facing request in them. "Strengthen us... in love toward one another." "Strengthen us to serve all in need." "Send us forth... that we may proclaim your redeeming love." The people who are grafted into God's promises aren't just the people around the altar rail but everyone we encounter.⁴

Sometimes we lean too heavily on one or the other. Sometimes we think of communion too much in terms of "for us." Or, to be more specific, "for me." We talk as if the Eucharist exists so God can forgive my personal sins.⁵ The next time you're killing time at the grocery store, I encourage you to spend some time in the greeting card aisle looking at what's on the first communion cards. There's bread, there's wine, there's a Bible verse, there's a kid dressed up in their Sunday best. Fine. But you notice there's always something missing from those cards. There are never any other people. Communion is all about you. And if there's anything in your experience that isn't exactly what you want or what you expect, that's a problem.

But sometimes we go too far in the other direction, too. We go too heavily on the "so that." This one is probably a little harder to see, but sometimes our language about the Eucharist strengthening or empowering us for service and mission can lead us into thinking that the really important stuff happens somewhere else. It happens outside the church. There are lots of churches that have a sign posted by the exit that says *Now Entering the Mission Field*. And it's not necessarily wrong, and it's coming from a well-intentioned place. But if you believe that the kingdom of God is manifested in the meal, then the celebration of the Eucharist is mission, too. This is also where God's work gets done. If God's redeeming, reconciling, and renewing work happens everywhere except the liturgy, then maybe we should be thinking about how we're doing the liturgy.

If you go too far into "for us," you're just practicing a less tacky version of the prosperity gospel. I don't expect God to give me a McMansion and a nice car, but if I give God an hour of my time, I expect to feel spiritually comfortable and be told that I'm right about everything and the problem is always other people. And if you go too far into "so that," you're just being legalistic and utilitarian. Communion exists mostly for the calories. Why even stay for the benediction? Get back out there where you can do something useful.

But if you can hold them together, for us so that, that's where the gospel is. That's why Abraham and Sarah's covenant with God is so important in our own story. Because the same God who met Abraham and Sarah when they had come to the end of their story meets us here in the middle of ours. That just as we are the heirs of their covenant, God makes us the conduits of others' growth in faith, hope, and love. God gifts us an eternal covenant for us so that we can be present for others.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

⁴As Luther puts it in the Large Catechism, when we get worn down in life it can be tempting to "yield hands and feet and become listless or impatient." Which probably describes the way many of us feel most days. God gives us the gift of the Eucharist so that we don't give into resignation, but we can live as "little Christs" to our neighbor. There's even a fun little line in one of Luther's writings where he says that we are joined together as one body in the Eucharist so that we can take on one another's joys and sorrows. Citations somewhere in *Luther's Works* 31 and/or 35 and the Large Catechism.

⁵ Usually these aren't the things I do or fail to do that are actually harmful, but just the ones that I feel responsible for and worry I'll be judged by others for. It's always remarkable to me how much of American Christianity is focused on performing a sense of guilt and unworthiness and then getting offended and denying responsibility for any of the harm we do.

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