Jesus Institutes the New Covenant

Summer Quarter: Living in Covenant
Unit 1: A Fulfilled Covenant

Sunday school lesson for the week of June 2, 2019
By Rev. Ashley Randall

Lesson Scripture: Mark 14:17-24; Hebrews 8:6-7, 10-1
Key Verse: Hebrews 8:6

Purpose:
To explore the amazing promise and invitation of the new covenant embodied through Jesus.

This Is Life
Agreements are an essential part of life. They are so numerous and commonplace that you may not even notice how often they impact your behavior. When you pull out of your driveway, you move to the right side of the road. When you reach the intersection, you comply with whatever sign or signal is present. You notice the posted speed limit (even if you don’t intend to obey it, you want to be sure you aren’t exceeding it to the degree where you might invite a conversation with a police officer).

You stop for a cup of coffee. From where you park to what you pay, there is one agreement after another that guides the process. Lines painted on the asphalt. Use this door. Line starts here. Place your order here. (Or maybe you pull through the drive-thru just to avoid all this negotiation.) “Grande dark roast with a splash of soy (in my own cup).” Rings up the same on the register week after week. Does your barista tell you, “If it’s not perfect, let me know and I’ll make it again”?

Of course, there are implicit and explicit agreements between students and teachers, employers and employees, financial institutions and their depositors, the plethora of civic, social, philanthropic and religious organizations and their members. Often these agreements are formalized with written contracts that spell out expectations, prohibitions, and potential penalties.

Then there are the agreements we make with those closest to us. Close friends often make earnest heartfelt promises to one another. Many close friends are bound by deep commitments that have been forged over decades as they have shared celebrations and crises. As they stand at an altar, a couple exchanges solemn vows “to love and to cherish until we are parted by death.” Those who have children discover a whole new realm of expectation and commitment. When we joined our congregation, we entered a covenant to “faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness.”
Agreements are an essential part of life in the community of believers. We often talk about our covenant with God and with one another. The lessons this summer will give us an opportunity to consider our relationship with God from this particular perspective.

The Uncomfortable Truth
Mark 14:17-21

As Jesus shared a meal with his disciples on the night of his arrest, he doesn’t have to enumerate all of the agreements that have been exchanged between him and his followers. Each of them has responded to Jesus’ invitation to “Follow me.” They have agreed to go where he goes, eat what he eats, sleep where he sleeps, do what he says. In fact, this meal has been arranged in accordance to the specific directions Jesus has given two disciples who were sent ahead of the rest of the group.

Each of them has paid a price to be a part of Jesus’ select group. As Peter is quick to point out, “Remember, we left everything to be your followers!” (Luke 18:28, CEV). They have left their homes, their families, their possessions, their careers – they have left everything to follow Jesus. And they have paid this price because they have the expectation that Jesus is leading them to something worth making this kind of sacrifice to attain.

Once everyone has been served, Jesus announces that there is someone at the table – someone who is a part of this intimate fellowship – who will betray him; and so, betray the agreements that have formed their fellowship and sustained it.

Since we know that Jesus is talking about Judas, we might miss the reaction of the other disciples, but Mark doesn’t. One by one, each of the other disciples ask Jesus, “It’s not me, is it?” (Mark 14:19, CEB). If you listen carefully, you can hear the pleading desperation in their voices. It is almost as if each of them is looking back over the last few months trying to discern which of the shortcuts or compromises they have made might merit being called a “betrayal.”

It is also worth remembering that, within just a few hours, all of them will find themselves denying, abandoning, and betraying this powerful prophet they had hoped “was the one who would redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21, CEV). Jesus affirms: the betrayer is close; the betrayal is deep, and the consequences of betrayal are terrible. “It would have been better for him if he had never been born” (Mark 14:21b, CEV).

A New Covenant
Mark 14:22-24

Jesus gives his disciples little time to process what he has just told them before he moves on with his agenda for the evening. There is a Passover liturgy that rehearses the story of the exodus from Egypt. This liturgy has changed over the centuries; but it has always served as an occasion for
the people of God to recall how God “delivered us from captivity, [and] made covenant to be our sovereign God” (*from The Great Thanksgiving, A Service of Word and Table, UMBOW*).

The Passover liturgy incorporates the use of bread and wine as two of the food items which help the participants recall what God did to move the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. The unleavened bread serves as a reminder that the people could not wait for their bread to rise because they had to leave quickly. In addition, the bread serves as a reminder of the manna God sent to feed the people while they wandered in the wilderness.

The modern Passover liturgy includes an obligation for those at the table to drink wine four different times during the meal. These “Four Cups” represent the four expressions of deliverance promised by God in Exodus 6:6–7: “I will bring out,” “I will deliver,” “I will redeem,” and “I will take.” This fourfold action of God led directly to the covenant God made with the Hebrew people at Sinai.

This is all worth noting particularly because, while Jesus would have been familiar with the significance of the covenant God made at Sinai, he “took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them” (Mark 14:22, CEV) not to recall this previous and enduring covenant, but to establish a new covenant. When Jesus takes the cup, gives thanks to God, and then gives it to them, he makes explicit his intention to establish this new covenant.

**A Better Covenant**

**Hebrews 8:6-12**

Once Jesus has introduced this new covenant he moves quickly from the table to the garden. After he has been arrested, there is no opportunity for Jesus to explain to the disciples what he meant by saying, “Eat my body. Drink my blood.” Nevertheless, the disciples were unshakable in their conviction that Jesus was establishing a new covenant as he gave himself completely; not only for them, but for many.

As the disciples told others about the events of that night, they turned to scripture to make sense of what Jesus had said. They recalled the long history of God’s invitation to enter into a covenant relationship. Even while the people had wandered in the desert, living in tents, moving from place to place as God directed, a priest (Aaron, at first) would offer gifts and sacrifices to God on behalf of the people.

This pattern was continued after the people took possession of the Promised Land. When Solomon completed the Temple, the gifts and sacrifices were moved from the tent, but the priest was still responsible for interceding between the people and God. Over the years there were lapses in the faithfulness of the people and their leaders. God sent prophets to call the people to repentance and to remind them of what was written on stone by God on Mount Sinai.
In an effort to understand what Jesus meant by this “new covenant,” the writer of the Book of Hebrews recalls the words of Jeremiah:

“I tell you the time will come, when I will make a new agreement with the people of Israel and the people of Judah. (Hebrews 8:8b, CEB)

Note that the substance of the new covenant is essentially the same as the covenant God established with Abraham: “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Hebrews 8:10c). (Check Genesis 12 to find more about God’s covenant with Abraham.) There is a big difference with any other covenant God has established prior to this one. God has initiated this covenant through Jesus Christ: “The time will come when I, the Lord, will write my laws on their minds and hearts” (Hebrews 8:10b).

Recall what Jesus does at the table. Jesus gives us his body and his blood. When we celebrate communion, the pastor says,

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,

That we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood. (A Service of Word and Table, UMBOW)

With this new, better covenant, Christ is with us to help us in our need. Not only to save us from our sin, but also to empower us to serve the world in Christ’s name. Christ has given himself to us. “Grant that we may go into the world in the strength of your Spirit, to give ourselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” (A Service of Word and Table, UMBOW)

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