

How Covenants Make Us



Joshua 24:1 "Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, ". . . choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River (Nile) or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

If we think about it, there are four big global forces coursing through modern societies and disrupting the world we live in. Worldwide migration is one, leading to mass immigration fleeing war and famine, and increasing demographic diversity everywhere. Economic globalization is another, creating wider

opportunity for many, raising up the poor in many places, but also resulting in greater inequality. The Internet is another modern force, giving people more and more choices over what to pay attention to, and with whom, and thus creating self-defined social media bubbles that end up isolating us. And finally an expanding culture of autonomy, of rugged individualism, of personal freedom, which often emphasizes individual choice and self-determination even over the best interests of the larger community.

All of these forces have liberated the individual in some very real sense, but they have also been bad for our national cohesion and the social fabric of our world. Income inequality challenges economic cohesion, as the socio-economic classes divide up against themselves; as the rich get richer and the poor, poorer. Demographic diversity challenges our cultural cohesion, as different ethnic groups rub against different traditions and foreign customs. And the emphasis on individual choice and our personal freedom challenges our community cohesion and settled social bonds.

The weakening of the larger social fabric has created a range of problems for our modern world. Alienated young men join gangs or militia so they can have a sense of belonging and purpose. Isolated teenagers act out and shoot up schools. More and more people grow up in fragmented, disconnected

neighborhoods, where we don't really know our neighbors. Political polarization then thrives when people don't interact with those on the other side of the aisle. And racial animosity stubbornly persists when we don't or can't interact with each other.

Odder still, people are often plagued by a sense of powerlessness in all of this. The liberation of the individual was supposed to lead to mass empowerment. But it turns out that people can effectively pursue their own goals and desires, only when they know who they are – when they have established firm identities. And strangely enough, strong identities can come only when people are embedded in a rich social fabric, in some kind of community or clan. Strong identities can come only when we have well-defined social roles – father, plumber, Little League coach. Strong identities can come only when we are seen and admired by our neighbors and loved ones in a certain way. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, "Other men are lenses through which we read our own minds."

You take away that rich social fabric and what you are left with is people who are uncertain about who they really are or what they really want out of life. It's hard to live daringly when our personal foundation is fluid and at risk.

We're not going to roll back these four big global forces coursing through modern societies, so the question is how to

reweave our broken and divisive social fabric in the face of these forces. In a globalizing, diversifying world, how do we preserve individual freedom, while still strengthening our social solidarity? That is the question --- and it is one in which as I claimed last week, the Church has a crucial role.

In her book "[Commonwealth and Covenant](#)," Marcia Pally of N.Y.U. and Fordham offers a clarifying concept. What we want, she suggests, is "separability amid situatedness." We want to have the freedom to go off on our own and create and explore and experiment with new ways of thinking and living; separability. But we also want to be situated, she says --- embedded in loving families and enveloping communities, thriving within a healthy cultural infrastructure that provides us with common values and goals, and a sense of identity.

Creating situatedness requires a different way of thinking. When we go out and do a deal, we make a contract. When we are situated within something, it is because we have made a covenant, not a contract, she says. A contract protects interests, Pally notes, but a covenant protects relationships, like in today's Old Testament reading where the Promised Land has been reached and conquered, and divided up among the twelve tribes of Israel. How does the tribes now stay connected? So Joshua gathers the leaders of the twelve tribes and calls upon them to reaffirm their covenant with God, which exists to remind

the 12 tribes that they are still part of one another, that they are still one people, one nation, the children of God. The covenant involves a vow to serve the Lord, who is remembered for his love and care for them as a people. And so the people answered Joshua, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples (of this land we now possess) . . . Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

People in a contract provide one another services, but people in a covenant delight in and protect their relationships, their common history, their communal connectedness, that sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves. Out of a sense of love of and duty to country, for instance, soldiers offer the gift of their service, and often their very lives. Out of love of their craft and their community, teachers offer students the gift of their attention. Our personal choices are made within a larger sense of others. The social fabric is thus rewoven in this frame of mind. Individuals pursuing their own path, but always mindful of their relationship with one and another.

During another period of great national fragmentation, Abraham Lincoln aroused anew a refreshed love of country. He played upon the mystic chords of memory and history, to keep the nation together in the midst of Civil War, and he used the Declaration of Independence as a unifying scripture and guide. One nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. Last Sunday, we all renewed our Baptismal Covenant, to continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. We renewed our promises to seek and serve Christ in all persons, not just those who look like us or think like we do, promising to love our neighbors as ourselves. We promised again to strive for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every human being. That's our unifying principle and guide.

These days the social fabric of our nation will only be repaired when we make and live out such local covenants – widening our circles of attachment across income, social, racial and cultural divides. Reweaving our social fabric will require leaders drawing upon our history to revitalize patriotism and fidelity. We need to retell our personal stories that include old themes, but lead to a new future together, reminding us all that we're a nation of immigrants, that we are all the people of God, that we are a community of love and faith, of care and concern for each other. Only then can we transcend the old

narrative and offer an updated love of one another, and hope for the future.

So choose this day whom you will serve, whether you will keep the covenant you have made, or whether you will serve the political partisanship which divides the people in whose land you are living; --- but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. AMEN.