

**October 16, 2022**

**Genesis 31:43-55**

**Covenant: More Than a Pinky Swear**

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A few weeks ago, I officiated a wedding for Lauren, a young woman who was part of one of the youth groups I led when I was a youth minister, and her partner Nate. I've known Lauren since she was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. We don't get to see each other very often as both of us have moved away. So, when she asked if I would officiate her wedding, I had some catching up to do, specifically, I hadn't met Nate. While we planned their wedding, Lauren, Nate, and I chatted over Zoom, I learned about Lauren and Nate's relationship, like they take promises seriously by reinforcing the really important ones with a "pinky swear."

So of course, I surprised them by including it in their wedding. After they shared their vows, I invited them to pinky swear to make it official. I feel certain the success of their marriage is guaranteed because of that.

Promises, whether sealed with a pinky swear or not, give us hope that the future will be a certain way or bring certain things. Promises give us the opportunity to trust God and to trust one another. Today's story ends with a promise, a covenant, between two men, Jacob and Laban. Before I read it, here's a little background on Jacob and how he ended up in a covenant with his uncle, Laban.

In the Hebrew Bible, Jacob was presented as a trickster. His story begins the day he, and his twin brother, Esau, were born. Esau was born first and in the ancient world, that came with privileges. Jacob was born second, holding on to Esau's heel, as if he was trying to pull him back. Parents aren't supposed to have favorites, but their father, Isaac, favored Esau and Rebekah, their mother, favored Jacob. At one weird point in their story, Esau traded his birthright to Jacob in exchange for just a bowl of stew. Skipping ahead a bit...just before Isaac's death, he sent for Esau because he wanted to give his #1 son a blessing. Rebekah, overhearing this and knowing Isaac's eyesight was failing, sent Jacob to his father, pretending to be Esau. Jacob stole his father's blessing.

When Esau discovered this, he was furious and planned to kill him. Rebekah found out and warned Jacob, so Jacob ran away to Haran where Laban lived. Laban had two daughters, Leah, the oldest, and her younger sister, Rachel. Jacob

fell in love with Rachel and agreed to work for Laban for seven years in exchange for Rachel. At the end of the seven years, he requested that Laban bring Rachel to him to make it official, which Laban did, except it was nighttime and Laban brought him Leah instead. Laban tricked Jacob into taking the wrong woman into his bed. He beat Jacob at his own game.

Jacob didn't realize he had the wrong woman until the next morning. And yes, the story is meant to be funny. Jacob was mad, but in the end, he agreed continue to work for Laban so he could have Rachel too. And much like Rebekah loved Jacob more than Esau, Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah. The dysfunction was past down, as it often is. A lot of other things happened, but in the end, readers learn God was with Jacob, causing him to prosper, increasing the numbers in his own flock of sheep. Laban's sons were jealous. In a dream, God told Jacob he needed to escape. He fled with his wives, all the children, all their livestock and possessions, back to Canaan. They got a head start on Laban who eventually caught up. Jacob had a lot of angry things to say to Laban.

This is Genesis 31:43-55.

<sup>43</sup> Then Laban answered and said to Jacob, "The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, the flocks are my flocks, and all that you see is mine. But what can I do today about these daughters of mine or about their children whom they have borne?" <sup>44</sup> Come now, let us make a covenant, you and I, and let it be a witness between you and me." <sup>45</sup> So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a pillar. <sup>46</sup> And Jacob said to his kinsfolk, "Gather stones," and they took stones and made a heap, and they ate there by the heap. <sup>47</sup> Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha, (Aramaic) but Jacob called it Galeed. (Hebrew) <sup>48</sup> Laban said, "This heap is a witness between you and me today." Therefore he called it Galeed <sup>49</sup> and the pillar Mizpah, for he said, "The Lord watch between you and me, when we are absent one from the other. <sup>50</sup> If you ill-treat my daughters or if you take wives in addition to my daughters, though no one else is with us, remember that God is witness between you and me."

<sup>51</sup> Then Laban said to Jacob, "See this heap and see the pillar, which I have set between you and me. <sup>52</sup> This heap is a witness, and the pillar is a witness, that I will not pass beyond this heap to you, and you will not pass beyond this heap and this pillar to me, for harm. <sup>53</sup> May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor judge between us." So Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac, <sup>54</sup> and

Jacob offered a sacrifice on the height and called his kinsfolk to eat bread, and they ate bread and tarried all night in the hill country.

<sup>55</sup> Early in the morning Laban rose up and kissed his grandchildren and his daughters and blessed them; then he departed and returned home.

The stories in Genesis are structured around two calls. The first eleven chapters deal with God calling the world into being to be God's faithful world. The rest of Genesis deals with God calling a special people to be faithfully God's people. The connection between God and God's people then, is that of calling and answering. The basis of the call in Genesis is the covenant God made with Israel. The people would be faithful to God and God would give them land and descendants and be their God, "You will be my people and I will be your God." This promise is woven throughout the Genesis narrative, reminding us that God is the God of the past, present, and the future.

In a covenant between two humans, both parties benefit and both parties have responsibilities to uphold. Covenant relationships between humans are all too often broken, but God never breaks God's covenants with humans, even when humans don't uphold their side of the covenant. Fear of the future, and each other, brought the covenant between Jacob and Laban about. Their covenant gave them hope for a future in which they could live peacefully. Jacob and his household, and all his property, would return to Jacob's home without fear of being pursued. In return, Laban was assured that Jacob and his people would not cross the boundary, marked by the pillar and the heap of stones, to harm him or his people. Neither had to fear the other. Laban named the pillar Mizpah, which means "watchtower" in Hebrew, marking that place as the place where they made their covenant, with God as their watching witness. The rituals of a sacrifice and meal sealed the deal, kind of like a pinky swear.

This story includes a lot of stuff that doesn't seem particularly relevant to us today, but we cannot miss that this story isn't just Jacob and Laban's. It is ours too. In his commentary on Genesis, Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann wrote, "With their complicated interrelations, this family is a microcosmic presentation of our 'common lot...' All of them know a future is coming which frightens them. They are not ready for it. At the same time, they crave it, and they dread it. None of them can bring that future. None of them can keep it from coming. None of them

can prepare for it adequately...It is a quarrel about the future.”<sup>1</sup> God’s covenant with the people lingers in the background of this story. This family was a mess, but God was God, and they were God’s people. This family’s future will be, because God is.

The future will bring uncertainty and surprise; human beings will make promises and break them, we will “trick” each other, and try to control everyone and everything, but ultimately the future will be shaped by the promise that we will be God’s people and God will be our God. Our end of that covenant is that we will be God’s people; we will be faithful to the ways of God. Just as the ancient Israelites were called by God, we are called. We are called, to frame it in our denomination’s terms, “to bring wholeness to a fragmented world.” That’s what our shared ministry is about and when we become members of DCC, we enter into a covenant with one another, each of us promising to do our part. This covenant is not based on fear of the future, but on hope for the future. It isn’t about a secret handshake or gaining entrance to a club, it is about living into our call together, promising to show up and take an active role in the ministry of the church and trusting others to do the same. There are lots of ways to do that and one of them is giving money to the church.

I created a video for the small group discussions we had this fall, in which I talked about this. In it, I mentioned that people have asked me why I don’t talk about tithing which, by definition, is giving 10% of our income to the church. The reason is simple. Nobody, including me, knows your financial situation better than you do. The truth is some of us are living paycheck to paycheck right. We have a mortgage or rent, utilities, food, childcare costs, student debt, and by the time all of that is paid, there is nothing left. The church should not and does not expect families to put themselves in a vulnerable situation to give or give more to the church. A church that does that is manipulative, abusive, and irresponsible. Sometimes 10% is too much; sometimes 5% is too much.

On the other hand, there are some who are in a secure financial position. Maybe the house is paid off, college is paid for, you just straight up earn a lot of money or received a bonus. Maybe your retirement plan has worked out better than you

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<sup>1</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, *Genesis: Interpretation-A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 259-60.

expected. Just as 10% is too much for some of us, 10% may be too little for others. And I hope if this describes your situation, knowing there are some who do not have the financial resources you have, you will consider giving more. There is a season for everything, and I hope if you are in a season in which money is not causing you to lose sleep, you will embrace it and give more.

If you are new to the church, and you are trying to decide what to give, use 10% as something to strive for, not as a mandate. Some of us may never be able to give even close to that. Yet, because of our covenant, I am asking you to give what you can. If you are living paycheck to paycheck, I invite you to pledge just a little, even \$5 a week. That \$5 a week matters. It matters to our budget and our shared ministry. And speaking from my own experience, getting in the habit of giving regularly to the church is important. If you can't give the amount you would like to give, maybe this is the year you will focus more on the habit of giving and less on the amount.

What does the church do with the money we give, you ask? If you want to see the church budget, please call the church office and we will send it to you. You can see in black and white what my salary is, how much we give to other organizations, and what it costs to maintain the church property. But my sense is, you would rather know how your covenant-keeping and generosity eased suffering and repaired brokenness in our community and beyond. Next week we are going to celebrate all of that. But I want to give you a sneak peak, so I asked Anna, Callie, and Alex how your giving has impacted the ministries for which they are responsible, and this is what they said:

Anna said: We've given money to families to keep them from experiencing homelessness. We've helped other families keep their lights and heat on. We've supported our partner organizations, like CONCERN and Martha's Task, believing in the good work they are doing. We have made it possible for people near and far to participate in meaningful worship online. Our online presence has grown by leaps and bounds. Members' generosity paid for the technology to do all of that.

Alex said: Our worship has encouraged personal growth and connection with God and with each other. Special services like the Longest Night service and the Pride service met people where they were and offered them hope and a safe place to belong. In addition, the choir has not only welcomed new members, but has

contributed to making worship beautiful. And choir rehearsal is a place for people of different ages and experiences to get to know and support one another. And, of course, Alex reminds us that your giving allowed us to snag Ben Pauls, our talented accompanist.

Callie shared: On Sunday mornings, Worship and Wonder welcomes 8-10 children as they learn our faith stories, ask questions, and learn to see themselves in the stories. Sunday nights, 6-12 young adults gather to eat a home cooked meal, listen to each other, learn life skills and self-compassion, and get reminded that they are not alone. Wednesday nights the Connections youth group welcomes 10-14 youth into a safe space amid their busy weeks. Callie said a lot more than that, but you get the idea.

As for me, I echo what everyone else shared and I want to say this. Sometimes churches don't want to talk about the reality that the generosity of members pays salaries. I don't think that is authentic. And I don't think we ought to treat staff compensation as a "necessary evil." Our staff is fabulous, and the church pays them to share their fabulousness. I need to tell you, one of the chief reasons so many good things are happening all at the same time is because your church staff members are the hardest working people I have ever worked with. They love what they do, and we love doing it together. The people I get to work with are creative, funny, smart, and brave (and a little sassy). They are worth every dime they are paid and more, also; they are priceless. They care deeply about the ministry of this church and about each one of you. They represent this church, and our values, so well.

At DCC we try to listen to what the community needs and respond and because there is a lot of desperation and need in our community and the world, I know, it would be easy for us to see it all, look at our budget, and instantly get overwhelmed. I face it every day when I walk in my office. Do you know what keeps me from feeling overwhelmed? You. You and our covenant with one another to show up and live into our call together. Our promises to each other, and my faith that we will keep them, give me hope that 2023 is going to bring even more hope and more love to our neighbors. We are going to keep welcoming, growing, and serving...together. I can't wait to see what we are talking about this time next year!

Next week is Celebration Sunday when we bless our 2023 pledges and celebrate our shared ministry. Make plans to be here to hear all about what we are doing. And be sure and turn your pledge in this week or bring it with you next Sunday. There are pledge cards in the fellowship hall, next to the box that says PLEDGES. You can also pledge online by going to our homepage. I am so grateful for your generosity, your presence, and your joyful hearts. We are better together. Amen.