

July 17th, 2022

Colossians 3:12 – 15 “The Covenant of Love”

This week’s section of our Disciples Affirmation of Faith is the first time we actually hear about God, which is another reason I can say, “This is not a creed” even though it sounds like a creed. All of the major creeds in traditions that use creeds start out with the words “I believe” or “We believe.” In fact, that’s what the word creed literally means. The first three words of the apostles creed in Latin is, “Credo in Deum.” “Credo” meaning, “I believe.” “In Deum” means “in God.” All creeds start with, “I believe in God.” When you come from a tradition that uses creeds, you want to make sure that everyone understands the particulars about what you *believe* about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit and the church, *in that order*. Here we are three stanzas into our Affirmation of Faith and we *finally* see the word “God.” I know how bad that sounds, but remember, the most important aspect of our affirmation of faith is *confession*, not belief. We as Disciples *confess* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God because that’s what the apostle Peter confessed when Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” From there, we transition into the second part of our affirmation that focuses on how, in Christ’s name and by his grace, we accept our mission of witness and service to all people. This week we have –

“We rejoice in God, maker of heaven and earth, and in the covenant of love which binds us to God and one another.”

“Are we ever going to see the word *believe* in this affirmation Pastor Jesse?” Well ... haven’t seen it yet. I’d say, tune in for the next few weeks and you’ll see but you can just turn to #355 in the hymn book and see that no, that word does *not* exist in this affirmation at all. The word we *do* have, as it relates to God, though, is “rejoice!” “We *rejoice* in God maker of heaven and earth.” So how is that word better than “believe?” Well, as I’ve said for the last couple of weeks, belief is just the acknowledgement of the existence of something or someone. If you haven’t noticed, we prefer more dynamic words that relate to specific

actions. We *confess* that Jesus is the Christ. We *proclaim* him Lord and Savior. We *accept* our mission of witness and service. That's a whole lot more exciting and descriptive than just "believe." In fact, when you read about people's response to God in the Bible those are the words you'll run into the most. Psalm 118:24 says, "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us *rejoice* and be glad in it." Isaiah 61:10 says, "I will *greatly rejoice* in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God." Philippians 4:4 says, "Rejoice in the LORD always; again I say, rejoice." How boring would it be if it was, "This is the day the LORD has made, let us believe and be glad in it?" That sounds so bland and lifeless. "I will greatly believe in the LORD; my soul shall believe in my God." That sounds even worse. *Of course* our response to the one who has created the heavens and the earth is going to be exciting and dynamic. Did anyone see the picture that the James Webb telescope took this past week? As the prophet Jeremiah said, "Ah Lord God! It is you who made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for you."

But there's more to rejoice in than just the wonders of the heavens and the earth. There's also the covenant of love that binds us to God and one another. What is a covenant? A covenant involves two or more parties. It's an agreement that has conditions and expectations, but they aren't one-sided like an edict. A covenant involves all parties bringing something to the table. When we think of covenants, the one that comes to most people's minds is the one between God and Abraham. God said, "Follow me and keep my commandments and I will make you a great nation." God initiated this covenant. There are expectations of Abraham and his descendants which is what *they* bring to the table, and there's God's fulfillment of a promise which is what *God* brings to the table. God's covenant with Moses and David are similar examples, but there are plenty of examples of covenants between people in the Bible. Genesis 31 gives us an account of Jacob and Laban's covenant at Mizpah. That one had more to do with borders and blessings, but it's not just a run-of-the-mill real estate transaction. It's about two willing parties coming to an agreement. It wasn't one party forcing something

on another, it was a mutual contract. But who wants to use the term “contract” when you’re talking about the relationship between God, the creator of all things and those who are created in God’s image?

“Contract” sounds like something you do when you buy a used car. Contracts are what you sign when you hire someone to re-model your bathroom. When you sign up for Netflix, you’re entering a contract. *Covenant*, on the other hand, is the language we use when two people decide to get married or when someone agrees to dedicate their life to a vocational path that’s distinguished by service to others. A covenant is not a goods and service transaction, it’s a *soul transaction*.

So what about this, “covenant of love that binds us to God and one another” here in our affirmation of faith? Not only do we rejoice in God, but we also rejoice in the covenant we have with God and *with each other*. But who is the “each other” in this case? This is where we go back to that first line of our affirmation of faith. “As members of the Christian Church.” That’s us ... the ones who aren’t just limited to mere “belief.” Here’s where we get to do all those action-related things ... here’s where we get to confess, accept, proclaim and rejoice so that others will know who we are and what we stand for.

Let’s consider Mr. Gaines M. Cook. Gaines was born and raised on a farm near the prairie town of LeRoy, Illinois. LeRoy had a population of 1,200 in 1897 when the first telephone arrived in town to help that little community stay in touch with the rest of the world. That’s also the year that Gaines was born. And wouldn’t you know it, Gaines was a member of the First Christian Church there in LeRoy! Just to give you an idea of how this all fits on a timeline, our church here in Chico was established in 1883 over on Hazel Street. As a movement, we were still fresh and united. Gaines earned a Bachelors of Arts degree from Eureka College in 1921 and a Bachelors of Divinity from Yale in 1925 and he soon became the Rev. Gaines M. Cook. He pastored several congregations in Illinois and New York. His gifts and graces for ministry were in the administrative department. He became a State Secretary of the Ohio Christian Missionary Society, which is what we

would call a Regional Minister today like our Regional Minister LaTaunya Bynum. Eventually he became the president of the National Association of State Secretaries. Then right after World War II, he became the Executive Secretary of the International Convention of Christian Churches which is equivalent to “General Minister and President” like Terrie Hord Owens is today.

Now remember Rev. Gaines M. Cook was an organizer. That’s how his brain operated. He liked order. His vision of the church was this well-oiled machine that carried out its mission and witness as disciples in the world. In Matthew 28:18 Jesus told his disciples, “Go ye therefore into all the world and make disciples!” Gaines took that commission to heart, especially the part about “into all the world.” But as a movement we were a big, hot mess in the organizational department. It’s not that we didn’t lack for zeal. We had plenty of that. As a movement we were growing so quickly that we didn’t always have time to stop and think about *how* we were getting it all done. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, we had so many fingers in so many pies all over the world that we started overlooking things like, “What happens when one of our missionaries out on the field stops getting support checks from their congregations back home?” Back then, all of our missionaries were responsible for raising their own support from individual congregations. Most of our missionaries did their best to keep in contact with their supporting congregations, but every now and then for whatever reason, they wouldn’t get a check from one of these congregations. They did the best they could to correspond with their congregations using “snail mail,” but when they missed 2 or 3 checks in a row, it became a problem. And maybe they were so far out in the field doing their work that they didn’t even know they hadn’t been receiving checks. Next thing you know, they need to go back to the states to raise some more money. Except you need money to buy plane tickets, and if you don’t have money for a plane ticket, you’re stranded. Did that mean the churches didn’t care about their missionaries? No. There was so much going on in our movement that it was hard to keep everything straight.

Gaines was distressed that there was no central organizing body that could help missionaries out if they found themselves stranded in the field. Wouldn't it be nice if we could just send our funds to a central office that would support and keep track of our missionaries out on the field so that each individual congregation didn't bear the weight of supporting them? Wouldn't it be nice for the missionary to never have to worry about being stranded? Well ... try telling that to someone who came to the Christian Church because they didn't like how most denominations wouldn't even give churches a say-so about the missionaries they wanted to support. Although there isn't much evidence to support this claim, I'm pretty sure the phrase, "You ain't the boss of me" came out of our Stone-Campbell heritage churches. Remember, we're the first American-born Protestant church. Individuality and liberty were high on our list of priorities. We are who we are because we didn't want some bishop in Europe telling congregations in the states what to do and what not to do. We rejected edicts from denominational leaders just as we rejected creeds.

Gaines sympathized with this sentiment. But he also sympathized with the missionaries who became casualties to the church's lack of central leadership. He proposed that we, as a movement, adopt a covenantal structure. Like I said earlier, a covenant is an agreement between parties. Not an edict. Not a contract. A covenant. One that is designed to bind us to God and to one another. Out of his concern for the ministry and mission of our movement Rev. Gaines, using his gifts and graces for administrative ministry, laid the foundation for our current structure by making sure that local congregations, the regional expression of the church and the general expression of the church worked together to fulfill our mission. It took many more people many more years with many more revisions to make this structure a reality, but once again ... it was God reaching out through the Holy Spirit to inspire and call those whose gifts and graces for ministry made a big impact on our church. And if you were in Bible Study on Thursday, you heard about how important the word "call" is when it comes to being disciples.

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians that Mary read this morning, encouraged the church to clothe ourselves in love so that we may be bound together in harmony and united as the one Body of Christ. Bound together in a *covenant* of love where everyone brings something to the table. May we continually make ourselves available and open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit so that we may likewise be called and inspired to do great things in Christ's name both here in our local communities of faith and throughout the world.