

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
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Sermon Notes

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No one makes a promise like God – No one

We tend to think of things such as “promises” as having been something that has lost its meaning over time. Folk talk about being “as good as one’s word” or conducting business on a handshake. While I still believe promises should be kept and that deals made on a handshake are as valid as with a contract – in many areas a contract is still part of the deal. The handshake is what makes the agreement, and the contract is what perpetuates the covenant beyond the moment; managing the complexities of the arrangements making it available for others to see.

We make agreements to bring harmony, balance, and resolve to a situation. They are meant, for however long they last, to bring definition, peace of mind, a degree of predictability to relations between the parties involved.

We know it doesn’t always work out like that.

It seems that even the promises that were made in times of antiquity were sometimes used not for their stated purpose but to manipulate others for personal, professional, or institutional gain.

Take Jacob, for example in this morning’s reading of Genesis. Here he is working for his for his uncle Laban for no fee. The sly Laban, worrying that Jacob will leave and having a an idea of why he is hanging around in the first place, suggests to Jacob that he should be paid something for his efforts and asks him what he would like. Without hesitation, Jacob says he would like to work for the right to have Jacob’s daughter Rachel as his wife.

And so, an agreement is struck that after seven years of work, Rachel would become his wife – not before.

Finally, the long seven years are done. And. when Jacob is presented with his bride in the middle of the night, he awakens in the morning only to find that it is Leah, Rachel’s older sister, who has been sleeping by his side.

Imagine how Jacob felt. When he confronts Laban, his uncle says you should have known that the deal you agreed to is not the “way” we do things in this country. We never give away the younger daughter first. In other words, “It’s your own fault for making such a bad deal.”

As angry as he probably was, Jacob was not to be dissuaded. So another deal is struck for Rachel for another seven years of Jacob’s work.

The Laban code and the moral here seem to be if you are stupid enough to make a deal that violates the law – don’t expect your deal to happen, whether you satisfy its terms or not.

Sure, we can take the romantic view – and it is important: realizing what Jacob was willing to do for the love of Rachel. It truly is a story of romance.

And there is the other theme for discussion of how women were treated as chattel, how marriage was nothing more than an agreement between everyone – excluding the women;

Or, how children were seen as sources for income, political alliances, or other such needs of the elders – usually their fathers;

and how having multiple wives was widely practiced and generally accepted.

It seems that those who suggest that biblical unions and families are models for our times are not quite up-to-date on their studies.

Still, for a few minutes, I want to think about Jacob and the time he waited and worked for what he believed his agreement to be. Seven years is a long time. There must have been moments when he was working in the field, through the heat, cold, pestilence, long hours, and everything else – when the vision of Rachel becoming his wife – kept him going. And, this passage speaks volumes to such love, not just to endure seven years but *seven more*.

How many people today would work fourteen years at hard labor for some one?

In Romans, today, Paul reminds us that even in the waiting, even when we feel we cannot continue to pray any more – that God is praying for us, or as Paul says it: [God is] “...making prayer out of our wordless sighs and our aching groans.”

Paul adds that through it all, God knows what God is doing – and that the covenant God has made with us, reaffirmed through God's son Jesus – would be kept: unlike the promises of Laban or anyone else.

No one can make a promise – or keep it – like God.

The last few weeks, we have been talking a lot about what gets us through, living into what Eckhart Tolle calls: “The Power of Now,” living in the moment. But it's not just living in the moment, in terms of “stopping” – it is living in the moment – in a way that we know where we are, most importantly for us – in the presence of God.

That reminder, that we are in the presence of God in our struggles and joys – broadens quickly to what it is we know of God in our lives. For accepting that truth – embraces all that we believe and believe in.

That's what makes the moment so rich, so filled with the promise: the belief that the covenant of God is with us and we with God through the many ways we know God and especially for many of us in the life, teachings, and being of the risen Jesus.

In other words, “the moment” is what it always has been “God's Spirit” right alongside us and well beyond us – so that no matter where we go in this world or the next, this universe or what follows – God's Spirit and presence and Jesus will continue to be right alongside us no matter where we are or what situation we may be.

All this is true, as well, for all those who have already gone before us – no matter how they moved from this plane of human form to the next.

So, even with the chicanery of Laban, Jacob never left his love of Rachel.

Even with conditions of this world, God's love never leaves us – nor do we ever leave God's love. Ever.

It is our daily practice of remembering this that is more important than all things, for all things that flow from such “being in God's presence” easily mean more and help us to accomplish more than anything we might think of as being solely of our own will.

On this day, when Marriage Equality has come to New York State, many people are celebrating the promise they never let go of or stopped working for – that one day in this state of all states – marriage would be available across gender identity.

In effect, in New York, by this change - marriage has transcended even the best

of marriage definitions from the sum total of all marriage practices in the bible. Marriage Equality acknowledges that marriage is more than just form. It underscores that neither laws nor oppression can stop the march through time of Love, that is God, coursing through all God's human creation

equally present in the love between same gender loving couples as in different gender loving couples.

Equality means that the differences separating *such* love have been removed. The truth is that the imposition of now bygone restrictions should never have existed in the first place – and must continue to be removed wherever they exist. To do otherwise is to stand in opposition – not just to one another – but to God and God's great and abundant love. In New York State, on this day, the Spirit is truly smiling (however it is the Spirit smiles!).

And this move toward restoration of justice is one example of how long things can take.

Justice work – fraught with its own pain, perils, and sacrifices takes time. Just as it takes time for the human heart to heal.

There are always changes in us when we enter into such intimacies of the human spirit – the spirit that calls us toward ending oppression and mistreatment of others. There are always changes that come about through suffering, as well, the suffering that enters each life – sometimes in the most difficult and wrenching of ways.

Today, we are reminded of loss and attacks by the tragedy in Oslo, Norway. We think of attacks on our own soil and we join with the world in prayer and sorrow for those who, today, are stunned and confused by what we understand too well.

And, we know...that even through this difficult day in the lives of others God will help them and us through: whether in seeking justice, overcoming terrible tragedies, or losses than can bear such heavy weight.

We know that just like the joy that couples today are feeling in being welcomed into matrimony after so long denied, that even though the journey may be long and more needs to be done, God's Spirit is always right alongside us, helping us, caring for others who have gone before. Really.

And be sure that when we gather here and in other houses of worship or wherever prayer may be spoken, lived, or breathed – that we see better our own Spirit through others as the Spirit moves from one to the other, creating the courage, strength, and love we need so that together in God's name we may face whatever comes our way – and be helpful to others.

And, lastly, we know that God keeps God's promises. Unlike others who make deals they don't mean, or change the rules after the agreement is made – God is as God has always been: with each one of us – and all of us – in all times and at once, now and forever.

Amen.