

**“A Covenant of the Heart” by Richard McBride**  
**Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Hebrews 5:5-10**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ April 2, 2006**

This morning, I am asking us to travel back in time, more than 2600 years ... and to transport ourselves into an altogether different social environment. We're going to have to shed our position as members of the world's single superpower and join a small nation under siege, already half of its people having been subjugated and taken off into exile. We will not have a continent virtually to ourselves, in which we have far more economic and military power than our neighbors north or south. No, we shall be in that fractious area we now call the Middle East, though at the time it seemed to be the crossroads of civilization – the clash point of powerful nations that threaten us from both north and south. It has been hard to hold onto our own identity. We tack back and forth between the superpowers of the day, trying to appease first one and then the other. The most recent political threat is from Babylon as its armies make their way from the north toward a climatic battle with Egypt, but a deeper threat has already taken hold – an assault on the spiritual core of the nation.

Onto this stage comes Jeremiah, a member of a priestly family from Anathoth, northeast of Jerusalem. So, it would fall to him eventually to serve his people as a priest, guiding them in the practice of their faith. But he receives a call from God to another vocation. [Jeremiah 1:4-10].

The word of the Lord came to me, saying, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”

Then I said, “Ah, Lord God, I do not know how to speak; I am only a boy.” But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, 'I am only a boy.' You must go to everyone to whom I send you and say whatever I command you.” Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you, says the Lord.”

Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, “Now, I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.”

God reveals to Jeremiah that disaster is coming from the north and instructs him to carry that warning to Jerusalem. He does so, but in a distinctive manner that comes to characterize his prophecy. He does not speak with a thunderous storm of denunciation. Instead, he announces the sorrow of God in seeing that God's people have abandoned their commitment to the covenant that God had made with them [Jeremiah 2:2-13, selected]

“I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert, through a land not sown. Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of his harvest ...”

Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, all you clans of the house of Israel. This is what the LORD says: “What fault did your fathers find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves.

I brought you into a fertile land to eat its fruit and rich produce. But you came and defiled my land and made my inheritance detestable. The priests did not ask, 'Where is the LORD?' Those who deal with the law did not know me; the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal, following worthless idols.

Therefore I bring charges against you again, declares the LORD. And I will bring charges against your children's children. Cross over to the coasts of Kittim and look, send to Kedar and observe closely; see if there has ever been anything like this: Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols.

Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror, declares the LORD. My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.

God, we might say, is astounded, confused, and heartsick that his people, made his people by a covenant promise that stretches back through Moses to Abraham, have wandered away, have lost their way, have abandoned the way.

Jeremiah experiences this torment personally. His mouth, having been touched by God and his voice having been claimed by God, Jeremiah embodies the heartbreak of God. [Jeremiah 8:18, 8:22-23 – 9:1]

Since my people are crushed, I am crushed  
I mourn, and horror grips me.

Oh, that my head were a spring of water  
and my eyes a fountain of tears!  
I would weep day and night  
for the slain of my people.

This is the personal voice of Jeremiah echoing the personal despair of God. This is poetry in the service of prophecy.

Jeremiah wrestles with his mission, and embarks upon profoundly intimate conversations with God. These conversations are often called *Jeremiah's Confessions*. It is as if Jeremiah has entered the confessional booth, there to pour out his most heart-wrenching lament over the work that he has been called to and the isolation that it brings him among his own people. [Jeremiah 20:7-9] Has any other prophet ever spoken so to his God? Listen:

O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived;  
you overpowered me and prevailed.  
I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.

Whenever I speak, I cry out  
proclaiming violence and destruction.  
So the word of the LORD has brought me  
insult and reproach all day long.

But if I say, "I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,"  
his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones.  
I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

The despair that he is driven to is the fear that his task as prophet is impossible. And yet, somehow he perseveres; his obedience to God is unwavering. There are some who find in the arc of Jeremiah's ministry and in the intimacy with which he seemed to know God a precursor of the mission and ministry of Jesus.

The destruction cannot be averted. As Israel had fallen earlier, now Judah must suffer the same fate. The leaders of Judah are overrun and taken in captivity to Babylon. Then with calm resolve, Jeremiah sends them a letter that counsels them to "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce." You are going to be there a long while, Jeremiah tells them. Therefore, "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf." Do not be deceived by any prophets who say otherwise, making deceptive promises. "I did not send them, says the Lord." [Jeremiah 29:5,7-9]

Now, it is to these same people that Jeremiah's most astounding word is delivered; finally, he is permitted to speak the promise of restoration [Jer 31:31-34]:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD,  
"when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah.  
It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers  
when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,  
This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel  
after that time," declares the LORD.  
"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.  
I will be their God, and they will be my people.  
No longer will a man teach his neighbor,  
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'  
because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,"  
"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

The Old Covenant is completely broken. It lies there on the ground, like shattered tablets, though not this time by the anger of Moses when he saw the golden calf. No, broken this time by neglect and forgetfulness and chasing after other gods. There is no going back to that old dispensation – when the Law stood over against the people and the people refused to obey it – when God spoke and the people refused to listen. This time God will bypass speaking and listening. God will write his Law directly on the heart, instill it directly into the mind. Only with this radical transformation will human beings ever attain complete communion with God.

You and I are left to ponder today whether this transformation has been achieved. Do any of us participate in such an intimate communion with God? Do we enjoy with God a covenant of the heart? ... And what is the role of this congregation is presenting us the challenge to live in faithful covenant with God and with one another?

I want to speak personally about this question, and I hope confessionally. I joined this congregation shortly after I arrived to work at Elon in the fall of 1984. At the invitation of then pastor John Irvine and with the sponsorship of this congregation, I moved my ministerial standing to the UCC in 1987. Wendy and I were married here on July 29, 1989, and though we became charter members of the Hillsborough congregation of the UCC since our home is there, I have maintained an

associate membership with this congregation. I have taught Sunday School in the Senior Adult class for many years. So, my personal history is intertwined both with this congregation and with the college, now university. I live, as it were, on both sides of the street.

I have long been interested in the many ways that these two institutions have a shared history. The Church was established April 19, 1891, just two years after the college received its charter. All 19 charter members were affiliated with the college, either as faculty members or members of families who had moved to the area so that their children might receive education at the college. The church's early ministers were Presidents or faculty members of the college. Its first services were held in the Chapel room of the college's original building.

However, on January 18, 1923, a disastrous fire destroyed the Old Main campus building, and with it the worship space. The church held its services at the local public school until Whitley was built and occupied in the summer of 1924. Sunday School classes were held in the Mooney building, whose cornerstone designates it as the "Mooney Christian Education Building." Also in 1923, the church officially changed its name from Elon College Christian Church to Elon College Community Church, signaling its interest in ministering to the community that by then had grown up around the college. In that same year a parsonage was built on land donated by the college, on the very site where the sanctuary sits today.

In November 1946, the church's first full-time pastor was hired, and in 1959 – the year I graduated from high school – the college appointed its first chaplain. Bill Andes notes in his history of the church that the deacons of the church welcomed him and declared, "The pastor and the chaplain will work together in ministering to the entire community."... There it is in our history, Dan, the mandate that have a monthly planning lunch, which we do ...

The desire for a church home separate from campus facilities began to surface as early as the 1920's, but the Great Depression and World War II prevented the congregation from achieving that dream until in the 1950's. First services were held in this sanctuary on August 16, 1959.

For most of Elon's history, the college was not a wealthy institution; its buildings served multiple functions. A stand-alone Chapel was never built, notwithstanding the close ties that the college felt with to its founding church, The Southern Convention of Christian Churches. It was left to this congregation to build the steeple that the college had never built. Whenever a campus guest asks me about the university's chapel, I answer that the Community Church serves as our chapel. This very room is where we gathered for prayer at 4:00 PM on the afternoon of September 11, 2001. Whenever there has been the death of a student or a faculty member, this is where we have come. And for more joyous occasions as well, this is where we celebrate the annual Moravian Love Feast at Christmas.

I have served as Chaplain now for 22 years; I have been an active participant in the life of this congregation for all those years. So, I have thought a lot about these two institutions that I love – the church and the university, each bearing the name Elon. What is the covenant that holds us together? A living covenant is marked by the gift of vitality that runs both ways. The entire UCC, of course, is built upon what we call 'covenantal' relationships among all its parts. There is no hierarchy to hold us together – only the bonds of a freely chosen pledge of mutual engagement and support. As in a covenant of marriage, so in a covenant between church and university, a vibrant relationship brings a mutual benefit. Each is strengthened.

Let me identify a couple of things that have come to my mind as I have thought about these matters. First, I want to see a vital covenant between the University and the United Church of Christ. At the national level, Elon is a member of the UCC's Council on Higher Education. The Council's goal is very straightforward: to encourage UCC colleges and universities to understand themselves as church-affiliated institutions. And, in turn, it asks UCC churches to see themselves as college and university affiliated churches. This rests upon the belief and commitment that Faith and Learning belong together.

Locally, how will this be expressed in the relationship between this church and this university? It is a good first step that your pastor and I have a good friendship and that we enjoy working together, but that is not sufficient. The relationship of our institutions ought not to be dependent upon the personalities of the Chaplain and the Pastor. It ought to rest upon those places where the missions of the two institutions intersect, especially those places where Faith and Learning meet. Our Religious Studies department has as its motto, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, Anselm's phrase that means "Faith in Search of Understanding." Isn't that what we want over here as well, especially in our way of being church? Faith Seeking Understanding. But the church goes one step further with regard to faith, and that is Faith Seeking Expression in a vital practice of faith.

Back in 1959, the deacons spoke of Chaplain and Pastor "[working] together in ministry to the entire community." I want to see a joint ministry addressed to the whole community that has the support of both church and university. I would like to see a joint council comprised of university and church folk meeting together several times a year to address issues of mutual interest. One piece of the visioning process should be devoted to conversations around issues like these:

- ❖ Who comprises "the whole community" nowadays? How broadly or narrowly do we identify the people we wish to impact?
- ❖ How do we serve students, faculty, staff and community members in ways that bring deeper understanding and more joy to their lives?
- ❖ How can this church assist in the spiritual and faith development of "the whole community?"
- ❖ What are the partnerships that are mutually beneficial?

It is clear that in a university town, a church where "God is still speaking" is an attractive church. In February I attended a conference at Florida State on the topic "Spirituality in Higher Education." Another attendee asked me whether Elon is church-related? Yes, I said, UCC. Are you a UCC minister? Yes, I said. "God bless you folks!" Our way of being church is attractive to university folks.

This church is attractive because of the marble tablet in the foyer that identifies the "Cardinal Principles of the Christian Church." The first three clearly identify us as a Christian body of believers: "Jesus Christ is the only head of the church. Christian is a sufficient name for the church. The Bible is a sufficient rule for faith and practice." The last three speak to our way of being Church: "Christian character is the only test of fellowship" – not creedal affirmations, not race, not class, not anything by which we separate ourselves from others. "The right of private judgment and liberty of conscience is a right to be afforded to and exercised by all" – we are a thinking church. We expect that we will think for ourselves and stay in conversation with each other about the life of faith. (This principle, by the way, is echoed in the university's mission statement.) Finally, "The purposes of the church will be realized in the union of all Christians." We practice inclusion, not exclusion, the uniting of believers, not their further subdivision into

competing groups. The United Church of Christ genuinely believes, as the current national campaign says, “Wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

So, the question that we need to continually address, and the question that awaits our answer, is “What is the covenant between us that God is writing on our hearts?”

~ Richard W. McBride