Sunday, October 30, 1988
PROMISES TO KEEP (No. 1 in a Series: Commitment)
Genesis 12:1-3; Matthew 5:33-37

One theme that threads its way through both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible is the story of explicit promises — a covenant, a commitment made between God and God's whole creation. To put it another way, it is at the center of our Christian faith that God has made an unconditional commitment of unconditional love to human beings and indeed to all of creation.

We first come upon this promise, this covenant, this commitment in the book of Genesis when God says to Noah after the flood, "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you — the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth."

Later in the book of Genesis, we read of God's covenant with Abraham: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great... and by you, all the families of the earth shall bless themselves."

The New Testament of the Bible carries the story of God's covenant continuing and being fulfilled with the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "God so loved the world that God came to live among us." We human beings also make promises or commitments. Because of God's covenant and commitment, because of God's promise of unconditional love, we human beings are better able to make commitments to one another in some form of faithful love. We are able to love because God loves us. We are able to keep our promises because of God's commitment to us. But unlike God, we sometimes break our commitments.

In this sermon series, we will explore the matter of commitments — why we make them, why we keep them, why we break them, and how all of this is related to God's commitment to us as experienced in the Christian faith.

Think of some of the ways in which we experience commitment in our lives. If we are married, that's one form of commitment. If we have children, that involves another commitment. Being a faithful member of the church is another commitment. Most of us are also committed to certain truths. For example, you may deeply believe in the obligation of people not to harm one another unjustly. You may also feel a deep commitment to help others because you believe that life is hard enough for anyone to get through, and that we can't do it alone — we have to help one another. And so you may be committed to volunteering time with an organization that helps others. Hopefully, you also have some commitments to yourself. You want to keep growing and learning. You want to remain healthy, both physically and mentally. And you do not want to be manipulated or used by others. The point is that our commitments take many different forms and have complex interconnections. Some of our commitments may frequently conflict with each other. For this sermon series, however, we will primarily look at our commitments to people because I believe these commitments will help us understand other kinds of commitments as well.

It wasn't too many years ago when sociologists and psychologists were calling this "the era of the uncommitted." In her book Culture and Commitment, Margaret Mead wondered how a youthful generation that doubted the sufficient value of anything to justify commitment could continue to build a culture. She noted the suicide of the fortunate and the gifted in the face of what they perceived as an empty future.

And it is not only the young who flee commitment but also the middle-aged and old. People of all ages are questioning the value of commitment. I've had couples come to talk about their marriage ceremony who have wanted to write their vows to say something like, "I promise to love you and stay married to you as long as I feel like it." They seem to believe that love is too easily stifled by the very idea of being obligated. Indeed, some argue that the binding of love by commitment may be what destroys it — destroys the spontaneity that makes us want to keep loving and doing the deeds of love.

Others have said that to commit ourselves to anything but the most temporary and superficial actions or relationships is to fail to take into account how much we change and how much changes in the world in a lifetime.

In 1985, distinguished University of California sociologist Robert Bellah and four of his colleagues published an important study about the loss of commitment in American life. The book is titled Habits of the Heart, with the subtitle Individualism and Commitment in American Life. The authors concluded that most of us don't really believe in commitment anymore. We believe instead in every individual's right to pursue his or her fulfillment. Whether that's true or not, I don't know. However, I do find a lot of people today wondering about commitment and what it means and asks of them.

It is a basic assumption of the Christian faith, and therefore of the sermons in this series on commitment, that all our yearning to belong to each other and to God can be satisfied only through some form of mutual commitment. It is further our assumption that when we make and keep commitments, it serves the long-term good of people in relationships — people who want to live in a caring human community. Indeed, it is our assumption that we cannot have a caring human community without commitment. We can create a good life together only out of trust. And trust, to make it last, needs commitment.

Think for a moment — what would our lives be like if this were the most we could ever get from anyone: "I'll be there if I can, but don't count on it."

We would go crazy, wouldn't we, if we could never count on anyone to make a promise to us and keep it? We would go insane with uncertainty if the people we need to trust the most — our spouses, our friends, our parents, our co-workers — never made and kept a commitment.

Our whole social fabric, even much of our economic life and our deepest human relationships, are all held together by an invisible cord called commitment. Every important encounter we have with other people depends on the strength of that unseen cord.

If we don't dare to make commitments or don't care enough to keep them, we make uncertain the relationships that most need to be steady, and we leave the people who most need to count on us unsure of where they stand. The fact is that we can keep our lives together only if we can trust each other to make and keep commitments.

On the other hand, what would life be like if we were stuck forever with every commitment we ever made? Completely stuck! So that we were never allowed to cut our losses and start over again after a bad beginning. Life would be cruel, wouldn't it, if we could never get a release from bad commitments? We would all be prisoners of our past mistakes, locked into promises we made when we didn't truly know what we were promising.

I am astounded by how much we need commitment from each other. But I am also impressed with how impossible it is, sometimes, to keep the commitments we have made.

So in this sermon series, we'll be looking at the importance of making and keeping commitments, and also at those difficult times when, for good reasons, commitments are broken.

Now, if we're going to be honest, we need to admit that, in some cases, people keep their commitments simply because it's easier that way. In a marriage, for example, some people get used to each other. They don't like surprises. They stay with each other because they are settled in and comfortable. And that's okay.

If they both work outside the home, they each know when the other is coming home. They know what TV programs they will watch and what food each one prefers. Neither one ever surprises the other, and that's the way they like it.

There are others who stay with each other because what they have is not as bad as what they think might be the alternative.

For example, there could be a banker in Grand Island who would leave his wife and family tomorrow if he did not put such a high value on his standing in the community. He is in the midst of a mid-life crisis and believes that somewhere there is a better relationship waiting for him that will unleash his potential for passion.

But he, being prudent as well as itchy, is aware that he needs the respect of the people in his church and in his community. He needs the goodwill of his wife's family too. It owns a large portion of the stock in the bank where he is a vice president, and he doesn't want to risk alienation from them. And he wants to keep his old friends. So he stays with his marriage commitment mainly because he is heavily invested in Grand Island.

Now place this same man in Southern California. Give him big-city anonymity so that he could be divorced several times without anyone at the bank's headquarters taking notice, and he might leave his wife two months after arrival.

We can give the man credit for his common sense, but we might wonder about his commitment.

And some people are trapped. I read the other day of a talented woman who has agoraphobia, a fear of people in groups, especially in large areas. She has a husband who is mean to her in several ways. I think she would leave him in a minute, but she can't get away because she does not dare to go outside to look for a job, and she can't afford to live anywhere else but at home with him. We might give her credit, perhaps, for not putting arsenic in his coffee, but we shouldn't confuse her staying with commitment.

The point is that not everyone stays with what he or she has because of a deep feeling of commitment. Some people stay where they are because the alternatives don't seem as good.

But there are other people who, for very positive reasons, choose to keep their promises. It's not because they are stuck with them but because they care about the people to whom they are committed. They are committed without even thinking about being committed.

Here's the story of John and Margie Cooper. They were married in 1941. Living on a farm in California, their dream was to become the country's biggest onion grower. But four years later, after having two children, Margie became ill with polio. She spent the rest of her life as an invalid.

Gone were the payoffs John had expected from his marriage with Margie. She was no longer able to be a partner in the business, a lover, or have any more children.

John and Margie Cooper had a 40th wedding anniversary in 1981, and someone who didn't know John very well asked him to explain his long devotion to his wife. "I'm a Christian," he said, "and we try to keep our promises." But it was not as if he would have left Margie years ago had his morality not stuck him to a vow he had made.

To people like John Cooper, a promise is like being born. He did the same thing a person born with a handicap does; he accepted his and Margie's situation as a condition of the life he was born into when he made his commitment to her. When Margie died, their son Dale asked his father how he had done what he had done all those years. His dad said, "I never thought about doing anything else. You just do it, and God helps you."

Commitment is what we call, in our everyday language, giving our "word." My dad used to say to us over and over again as we were growing up, "A person is only as good as his or her word." To make a commitment to another, to give our "word," is to enter into a new form of relationship. When I make my commitment to another person, I dwell in the other by means of my word.

According to the teachings of Jesus, our "word" ought to be enough. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Again you have heard that it was said to people in the past, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.' But I say to you, do not swear at all... Let what you say be simply 'Yes' or 'No.'" Whenever we betray our word, we always stand to lose a part of ourselves.

Caring and commitment go together. We cannot have and live in a caring community or world without making commitments and keeping them. Above all, we need to make commitments as a safeguard against our own inconsistencies.

Personal commitments are one of life's high adventures. We can keep our promises because we know we can depend on God's promises. The right kind of commitment-keeping makes good sense because it is the only way to keep human relationships healthy and alive. And good human relationships make everybody's life better. Amen.