Sunday, November 6, 1988
CARING, COMMITMENT AND HOPE (No. 2 in a Series: Commitments)
Romans 5:1-5

Bill was not a brilliant student and perhaps he wouldn't have made it through law school if his wife Carol hadn't been there to urge him on. At the same time, her job was crucial to their financial stability. She earned the rent and grocery money.

Bill and Carol, like almost all married couples, had some good times and some bad times during those early years of marriage. After graduation, Bill began his law practice with a firm in Rhode Island. The best times were the summer weekends they spent together at a cabin off the coast of Maine. The worst times were when Carol was pregnant, usually sick, and not much fun to be with.

After ten years of marriage, Bill began to fall in love with another woman who had become a friend of his. She was a gifted individual, a survivor who had entered law school at thirty-five after her divorce and, upon graduation, found herself doing very well in a law practice that mostly involved writing wills and handling the estates of wealthy people.

She let Bill know soon enough that what she wanted from him was a very close relationship. Surprised that an elegant and very successful woman like her was attracted to him, Bill fell in love — and out of commitment.

Carol agreed with Bill that their marriage had grown stale, but when Bill told her he wanted to leave and dared to ask for her blessing, she got very angry.

"My blessing? You and that woman will burn in hell before you get my blessing," she told her husband. "You made a commitment to me. You may get your middle-aged kicks from that other woman, but you are committed to me. Doesn't commitment mean anything to you?"

"Commitment?" Bill replied. "You talk commitment when my happiness is at stake? Our happiness is a lot more important than sticking to a lousy commitment we made years ago. Give me one good reason why I should be stuck with it now, just when I finally have something good going for me."

"Why? Why? Just because you made it, that's why."

What are commitments? Why do we make them? Why do we keep them? Why do we break them? What do they have to do with our Christian faith?

Last Sunday, in the first sermon of this series on "Caring and Commitment," we were reminded that our faith tells us that God is the original commitment maker. It is at the center of our Christian faith that God has made an unconditional commitment of unconditional love to us as human beings and indeed to all of creation. God's care for us and for all of creation, and God's commitment, go hand in hand.

I also said in the sermon last week that we human beings make and keep commitments because it serves the long-term good of people in relationships — people who want to live in a caring human community. We create a good life together only out of trust. And trust, to make it last, needs commitment.

Commitment is the invisible bond that binds a collection of individuals into a caring community. Everything depends on it — whether it be a family reunion, a committee meeting, a good friendship, or a lasting marriage.

But there can be problems with commitments too. The first problem is that some people become self-righteous about their commitment-keeping. They believe they should keep commitments simply because people who keep their commitments are better people than those who don't.

I once knew an individual who continually reminded everyone of what a committed person he was. He also constantly reminded his wife that he had not left her — not because he cared for her and loved her, but because he was such a loyal individual. Thus his wife felt like an unwanted person whose husband had stayed with her only because he was too moral to leave her.

I remember reading a short story years ago about a woman who was very wealthy and was committed to the poor people in her town, visiting them regularly, always leaving behind a gift suitable to their needs — as she saw them — along with a suggestion that a little more ambition and a little more thrift could improve their situation. She never left a poor family's home without making them feel worse for her having been there.

They felt worn down by her commitment to them, and they hated her for her gifts almost as much as they hated themselves for accepting them. What she was committed to was her reputation as a rich woman committed to poor people.

C.S. Lewis wrote a suitable epitaph for such a person:

Erected by her sorrowing brothers
In memory of Martha Clay
Here lies one who lived for others.
Now she has peace. And so have they.

A second problem with commitment is that some people make too many of them. They are over-committed.

Years ago, I knew an individual who was the most committed person ever — if you gauge commitment by numbers. The problem was that he made so many commitments that he couldn't keep all of them, and as a result, he was continually letting people down. He expected others to let him off the hook because, after all, he was so terribly committed. He intimidated people with his ability to make commitments. So some were always excusing him. They would say, "Oh, Walter! That man has so many commitments, we shouldn't expect him to show up here for us." Thus, he got away with not keeping commitments because he was such a committed person.

But it's not right. He didn't let people down because he was committed; he let people down because he was not responsible. He made too many commitments to too many people.

A third problem with commitment is that sometimes our commitments come into conflict with one another. Here's a teacher who is committed to her students. But sometimes she has to say no to an individual student who needs her help at an hour when she needs to get ready to

give a lesson to a room full of other students. On the other hand, that individual student's needs may be so urgent that she gives him or her all of her attention, even if she has to stumble through the next class. When commitment comes into conflict, then we have to make some difficult choices.

But the most serious problem with commitment is that sometimes we feel compelled to break a commitment because something has changed within us, within the relationship, or with the person with whom we made the commitment.

A wife says to her husband, "I'm leaving you, Albert. The only way I can survive is to get away from you." The husband replies, "How can you simply run away? What about the vows you made to me? Doesn't your commitment mean anything to you?" Rebecca answers, "Yes, Albert, I've kept that commitment for twenty-two years. Now I need to keep another commitment." "What commitment?" he asks. And Rebecca answers, "I need to keep a commitment to myself, Albert. Can you understand that? To myself." "How about me?" he asks. "Have you thought of what you owe me?" "Yes, Albert," she replies, "I've thought a lot about what I owe you, but right now I owe myself even more."

What we have to be able to distinguish in situations like this is the difference between our needs and our desires. Simply because I desire something does not mean that I need it. However, we also know that when we want something badly, we can convince ourselves that we truly need it. I may not need a new and fancier automobile, but if I want it enough, I can convince myself that I truly need it. The more addicted we are to things we desire, the more they feel like needs.

So in this matter of commitment, we always have to ask ourselves if we are committed to our needs or merely to our desires. And most of the time, we need help to distinguish one from the other.

Some people sacrifice what they really need to their partner's desires and put up with the unfairness for years. Then they suddenly discover that it's time to keep their commitment to themselves, time to tend to their own needs.

This is what happened to Rebecca. For many years, she surrendered two basic needs to Albert's compulsive desires. She needed self-respect. And she needed integrity in her life. She surrendered them both.

Albert had a strong desire to live well beyond their means. He drove a luxury car when he could hardly afford a subcompact. He also had a compulsion to let Rebecca know that she was inferior to him — not as well-educated, not as talented, not as smart, and generally not quite in his class.

Rebecca finally decided that it was time to make her move, to keep a commitment to herself. First, she tried to persuade Albert that she had a deep need to respect herself and that she needed financial honesty in her life. She tried for five years, but he would not change or could not change.

Failing to persuade him, she separated from him to find her self-respect and, in the bargain, to gain some integrity in her life.

Rebecca was committed to Albert. There's not much doubt about that. Her conflict arose when she awakened to a commitment she owed to herself. She had kept faith with Albert for more than 20 years. But Albert had never given her permission to be faithful to herself. So she ended the conflict by ending her commitment to Albert.

Who failed to keep the commitment? Did Rebecca fail her commitment because she walked out on Albert? Or did Albert fail his commitment because he refused to honor the most basic term of all personal commitments — the surrender of our desires when what we want prevents another person from getting what he or she needs? Sometimes commitments are difficult to keep because of the conflicts.

Sometimes, too, we make commitments that violate our own conscience, and then we ought to break them. There is no virtue in commitment to vice. There is no moral magic that makes every commitment worth keeping. We can commit ourselves to evil things. We can commit ourselves to good things. Only commitments made to good things are worth keeping.

Even with commitments to good things, how do we know we have what it takes to keep a commitment? The answer is, we don't. Not for sure. Every commitment we make is an act of hope.

Hope is not a guarantee of complete satisfaction. It is a kind of power, an inner power to believe that life can get better — not perfect, just better than it is — good enough to make it worth the struggle to keep our commitment to someone we care about. Remember I said in a sermon last fall that things in this world do not have to be perfect to be good. Every relationship is carried on imperfectly by imperfect people. Every friend is flawed. Every spouse has failings. Every commitment ever made has been made by a flawed person to a flawed person.

And when someone breaks an important commitment to us, or we come to believe that because of a conflict that cannot be resolved, we have to break a commitment — one we never thought we would break — the good news is that there is life after the death of a commitment. And the further good news is that God forgives us. And so we are to forgive others and ourselves. God allows and wants us to begin again.

After the death of a commitment, one good way to keep the door open to hope is by making and keeping commitments to other people — smaller, limited commitments to friends and neighbors — and a larger commitment to ourselves.

Underneath all of our hope is our faith that God is continually committed to each one of us and to all of creation. Amen.