Sunday, November 13, 1994
PROMISES, PROMISES
Psalm 145:8-13

Somewhere today, a woman is saying, “I would like to quit this marriage and start over with somebody who knows how to love me; God knows the man I married has not given me the love I need.” But then she remembers a promise she made and decides to stick with the marriage and try to make it work.

Somewhere today, a father is saying to himself, “I want my impossible daughter to get out of the house and never come back; God knows she has driven me out of my mind.” But he remembers a promise he made to her when she was born, and he decides to hang in there with her, hurting love and all.

Somewhere today, a mother and father are thinking, “There are so many choices today for our children. We want them to have as many opportunities in this world as possible. Let’s skip going to church this Sunday morning.” But then they remember the promise they made at the baptism of their children, and they decide to go to church.

Somewhere today, a minister is thinking, “I am going to give up my calling and find a line of work that offers a little more appreciation; God knows this congregation has given me third-degree burnout.” But she remembers the promise she made to God when she was ordained, and she decides to renew her spirit and stick with her vocation.

Somewhere today, a church member is complaining, “The church is always asking for money, and there are so many things that I want — all of them requiring money. So I’m going to put my giving to the church last, and if there is some money left over, then I will give it to the church.” But then he remembers the promise he made when he joined the church and the promise he made when he turned in his pledge card, and he decides to put his giving to the church first.

There are many individuals today who still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets tough because they promised once to see it through. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make.

In this sermon, I want to remind you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God. You are like God because God makes promises and keeps them.

One central theme that threads its way through the Bible is the story of an explicit promise, a commitment between God and God’s whole creation. It is at the center of our faith that God has made an unconditional promise of unconditional love to human beings and to the whole creation.

It all starts way back in the Old Testament when God made the creation good. The promise becomes specific with Abraham, Sarah, and their offspring. It is reaffirmed over and over again.

Take the example of Moses. When Moses had an overwhelming experience of God’s presence and call in his life, he was asked by God to become the leader of his people. He was

reluctant. He wanted to know more about this God who was calling him. So he asked God, “What is your name?” The name that came to him from behind the burning bush in Hebrew can best be translated as, “I am the One Who Will Be There With You.” In other words, “I am a promise-maker and a promise-keeper. I will be with you. I will not desert you, ever.”

The people that Moses led out of Egypt went with him because of the promise. The coming of Jesus to live among us, including his death and resurrection, is a continuation of that same promise. Didn’t Jesus say to his followers, “I am with you always"? Related to this promise was his statement, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.”

Promise-making and promise-keeping human beings are like God. What a marvelous thing a promise is. When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay.

When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future. When I make a promise to you, I am telling you that I am going to be there despite my feelings at the moment. When you make a promise, you act in freedom. You are saying that you are not a bouncing ball that someone else is bouncing. You are saying that you are free to create a future of your own. You are saying that you will go against peer pressure if necessary to keep your promise.

When you make a promise and keep it, you are living up to the identity that God gave you. The culture tells you that you can be a real self only if you claim your right to self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. As a free self, you become a genuine self by making commitments to other people and keeping them.

Some people ask, “Who am I?” and expect the answer to come from their accomplishments. Other people ask, “Who am I?” and expect the answer to come from their feelings. Still, others ask, “Who am I?” and expect the answer to come from what other people think about them. A person who dares to make and keep promises discovers who she is by the promises she has made and kept to other people.

What you feel is not what you are. Here’s a metaphor that I’ve always liked: “Feelings are flickering flames that fade with every fitful breeze.” What you want is not what you are. Desires rise and fall and change so fast that they can only tell you what you want at any given moment. Knowing what you want is not the same as knowing what you are.

It is the power of promise-making and promise-keeping that makes you who you are and builds a genuine identity for you. It is to be like God. You are your promises, and you lose hold of yourself when you take no pains to keep them. The Psalmist wrote years ago, as read earlier in our scripture reading, “God is faithful in all words and gracious in all deeds.”

Unfortunately, I believe that promise-making and promise-keeping are not high on the list of positive character qualities in our culture.

Not very many years ago, sociologist Robert Bellah and four of his colleagues published an important study about the loss of commitment in American life. The book has the title Habits of the Heart, and the subtitle Individualism and Commitment in American Life. The authors concluded that many people don't believe in promise-making and especially in promise-keeping anymore. Pursuing one's own fulfillment is the first priority, and if that means breaking a promise, so be it.

What we tend to forget is that it serves the long-term good of people in relationships when promises are made and kept. We cannot truly have a caring community without the power of promises made and kept.

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." Or if, in a marriage ceremony, each partner said to the other, "I promise to love you as long as I feel like it."

Society would fall apart, and we would go crazy 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 wives, our husbands, our children, our parents, our co-workers, our friends — never made promises and kept them, or as is too often the case today, people make promises and do not remember them.

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

What else keeps a marriage together? When two people get married, they take on two new identities. Each of them says to the other what God said to Moses: "I am the one who will be there for you."

As I mentioned earlier, this sort of promise is countercultural these days. We have, in our culture, decided to make contracts instead of promises. This is not to downgrade the importance of contracts in many situations. But there is a difference between a promise and a contract. A contract goes something like this: I will be there for you as long as you provide me with all the satisfaction I have coming. This is different from a promise. A true promise is one that one keeps even when you are not getting what you have coming. The power of a promise is the power to stick with what we are stuck with.

Take the family as an example. What is a family but a community of promises made and promises kept — no matter what?

A family is not just two or more people biologically related who happen to live under one roof. A family is not a management device by which two adults shuffle children around to various others who do a lot of the caregiving. A family is a community of people who dare to make a promise and care enough to keep it, no matter what. A true parent has the same name as God, "the one who will be there with you."

A family is held together by promises. Where promises fail, families fail. The rebirth of the family can begin only in the rebirth of promise-keeping.

When you get right down to it, everything we do together — from a nation conceived and born in liberty, to a family reunion, to being a member of a church, or to making a church pledge — hangs on the thin thread of promises made and promises kept.

Toward the end of his three volumes on the history of the French Revolution, Thomas Carlyle concluded that the revolution failed, not because of corruption in high places, but because ordinary people in their ordinary places neglected to keep their promises.

Without promise-keeping at every level of our society, we are in trouble. Without promise-keeping, no law, no police force, no legal contracts can keep a community human.

Caring, promise-making, and promise-keeping go together. To make and keep promises is to live fully in God's image.

And there's more good news in making and keeping promises. Promises made and kept are one of life's highest adventures. We are able to keep our promises because we know we can depend on God's promises. Amen.