Sunday, October 20, 1996
CHILDREN AND PROMISES
Matthew 18:1-7

As human beings created in God's image, we possess two remarkable powers given to us by God. If used correctly, these two powers can help us create a future worth living in. One of these powers, which I talked about in a sermon several weeks ago, is the power to forgive. The other is the power to make and keep promises, or commitments.

The power to forgive frees us from past pains that we cannot accept and cannot forget. When we forgive, we break free from the normal laws that keep us tied to our painful pasts. By forgiving others, especially those to whom we are committed, we untie ourselves from the pain they caused us.

Just as the power of forgiveness releases us from a painful past, the power to make and keep promises creates a foundation for a hopeful future. Promises made and kept are what hold human communities and families together. They give us something to depend on. Our lives would be chaotic without promises made and kept. Promises protect us from our changing, fickle moods and feelings. With commitments, we create islands of security within a wild sea of insecurities.

Consider some of the ways in which you experience promises in your life. If you are married, you made solemn promises to each other. These promises can protect you from changing moods and feelings. If you have children, that involves other promises. In this sermon, we're going to talk about those kinds of promises in more detail later. If you are a member of a church, you made promises when you joined. If you have a mortgage on your house, you made a promise to make regular payments.

As Christians, our ability and necessity to make and keep promises is based on God's promises. At the center of our Christian faith is the belief that God has made an unconditional promise of unconditional love to human beings and to all of creation. This means that none of us is ever more God-like than when we make and keep our promises and commitments to each other.

There is so much about our future that is out of our hands. We inherit genes we neither earned nor asked for. We are drawn into the deadly games played by the principalities and powers of this world. Life has its difficulties, its complexities, its unfairness, its unpredictabilities. There are many things beyond our control. But we do have control over the most important arena where we live out our lives: we can decide, once, and then a thousand times over, that we will keep our caring commitments to people. This power, when we choose to use it, breathes lasting life into the most precious aspect of our future — the relationships we have with people we love.

It's a paradox. We use this power to limit our power — to tie ourselves to a promise we made once, a year ago, or a lifetime ago, a promise we intended to keep. We give someone else the right to hold us to that promise. All of which sounds more like losing control than taking control.

But that is the paradox. Being bound to a promise we make is a way to set the stage for a future that is in our hands. Promises are the solid foundations on which we build our lives.

Take marriage as an example. If our spouse always met all of our needs, we could glide through the future with him or her without even thinking about commitment. If the flame of desire for another person never flickered, a promise would not be necessary.

But life is not that way. Promises are necessary because we are all imperfect. Every relationship is carried on imperfectly by imperfect people. Every friend is flawed. Every spouse has failings. Every child has faults. Every promise ever made is made by a flawed person to a flawed person. That's why promises are so important. They are the glue that holds society together.

Promises are also necessary because each one of us is unique, different from every other person. Inside or outside, we are all, at certain points, strangers to each other. I'm glad it is that way because our mysteries make us interesting. In addition, if you are different from me, you offer me something I cannot find in myself.

But differences can push us apart too. When other people are too different from us, we feel threatened. So we are imperfect, and we are different, and we keep our promises in spite of it. Commitments are about staying together despite our imperfections and differences.

John and Margie Cooper were married in 1941. Living on a small 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, or a lover, or have any more children. John and Margie Cooper celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary, and at the celebration, someone who didn't know John very well asked him to explain his devotion to his wife. "I'm a Christian," he said, "and we try to keep our promises." When Margie died, their son asked his father how he had done what he had done all those years. His dad said, "I never thought about anything else. I have no regrets. You do it, and God helps you."

Life would be a mess if all we could get from each other was, "I'll try to love you and stay married to you as long as I feel like it," or if we said to our children, "I'll be there for you if I can, but don't count on it." Yet that's the message many people give their children today, if not in words, then in their actions. Here's an example.

Mike, 38, divorced after twelve years of marriage with two children, aged 10 and 11, is confused. His dilemma is how he chooses between his children's needs and his own immediate desires. His new lover, 28, gets upset if he sees his children a lot. She was abandoned by her dad when she was little, and now she is determined to make sure that no matter how children are abandoned on her watch, she won't ever be abandoned again. Would you not say that her actions are wrong? She is intentionally hurting others for her own gratification. Even more troubling is Mike's weakness. He thinks he's a saint for saving her from the pain in her life while looking for a way to make his own life more serene. He knows it isn't the right thing to do. He keeps breaking promises to his children to please his new lover.

I believe that most of us want to keep our promises. We want to be trustworthy. So what is it that causes us not to keep them?

In his book The Road Less Traveled, M. Scott Peck points out that being trustworthy takes a certain amount of self-discipline. We begin to develop self-discipline, or the lack of it, at an

early age, and much of it is learned through imitation in the home. If we keep breaking our promises to our children, how can we expect them to be trustworthy later in life?

As Peck points out, “It is not that the homes of undisciplined children lack discipline. More often than not, these children are punished frequently and severely throughout their childhood — slapped, punched, kicked, beaten, and whipped by their parents for even minor infractions. But this discipline is meaningless because it is undisciplined discipline.”

Usually, such parents are undisciplined in their own lives and, therefore, serve as negative role models for their children. The children soon notice that the parents make promises they don’t keep.

What sense does it make if the husband abuses the wife physically or verbally, or the wife abuses the husband, and then one or both of them abuse the children, and the children are told they must control their tempers? On the other hand, if a child sees his or her parents, day in and day out, behaving with self-discipline, restraint, dignity, and a capacity to control their own lives, then the child will come to feel deep within that this is the way to live.

When a child sees day in and day out that the parents are trustworthy, then it is all the more likely that the child will be trustworthy too.

Listen to this letter from a husband and father: “I am a happily married, forty-year-old Christian father of three daughters, ages six, eleven, and thirteen. While I am happily married now, our marriage has had its problems. We started off good, but then things got steadily worse until it all came to a head about two and a half years ago. We had been arguing more and more, and then we had a big fight. I decided it was time to end the marriage. I thought there were all sorts of good reasons to split up. Our relationship was strained and distant. I knew our children were suffering, watching us fight. Coupled with this was the fact that a woman I knew casually made it very clear that she wanted to get to know me much better (she was in her mid-twenties, married, and very cute, and if she wanted me... I thought I must be hot stuff). I knew I’d lose the house and most of my money to child support, but heck, it was worth it, right?

“Then I thought of what I’d really lose. Tucking my daughters into bed, reading to them, playing games with them, helping with their homework, helping them grow up into mature, responsible young women, and all the other little things I’d miss if I wasn’t there on a daily basis. I also thought about what I’d be teaching them about keeping promises, about honor, about being trustworthy.

“I became more understanding of our problems as a married couple. I became more considerate. I tried to help more around the house. A funny and wonderful thing happened. We began to be able to talk to each other without arguing. We started to listen to each other. Our marriage is not perfect, but I know it’s going to last.”

When we are responsible for children, whether we gave birth to them, adopted them, or inherited them through a second marriage, nothing is more important than making and keeping our good promises to them.

This is also true for us as a church. Whenever a child is brought here to be baptized, not only do the parents make certain promises, but we as a congregation also make a solemn promise: “We promise that we will uphold these parents in the fulfillment of their vows and provide for all children full opportunities for Christian growth and nurture.”

Human honor and the ability to trust the integrity and word of others are critical necessities in the life of a healthy family and society. Without this basic reality, life itself becomes no longer trustworthy.

It is at the center of our Christian faith that honoring commitments, keeping our promises to family, children, spouse, and church, gives us the opportunity to build relationships of deep meaning. Relationships of deep meaning bring satisfaction and happiness. When we do that, we are living up to the image of God that is in us.

That sounds like a win-win to me. Amen.