

9 Pentecost 2003
"The Way of Relating to God"
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

God's out there right? He's out there in some shape or form, doing what God does and we are here in Purcellville involved in our own lives, getting on as best we can. That's the situation and it prompts a question. **How do you have a relationship with God?** How do you get from here to there? How do you bridge the distance between you and the God who is there? How do we relate to God?

That's a big question that's in the back of a lot of people's minds - and sometimes even in the front of their minds. I guess its one of the great questions of life and religion. So how DO you have a relationship with God?

If someone asked YOU how would you answer? Do you know how to have a relationship with God? **If you're a Christian, it's a *helpful thing to know*...** And if you want to share the good things God has given you with others, it's important to be able to articulate it in a clear way.

Well guess what. Our passages this morning make it really clear, and so does the service of baptism we're celebrating. So if you're curious and paying attention you'll be able to answer the question of how to have a relationship with God.

Let's start with a key word. It's covenant. And what is a covenant? It is an agreement that defines a relationship between people. In a covenant, **people make promises to each other that create an understanding**, a basis for trust and friendship and commitment to one another. They help us be responsible and care for each other. And when you break that understanding it hurts the relationship.

God makes covenants to with his people. You see that in our Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy. Moses has gathered the people of Israel together on the banks of the Jordan River. They've been in the desert for 40 years and now they're leaving the desert and entering this beautiful land to claim the blessing God has promised them for centuries.

But on the brink of this new world, this new life, God sits them down to make a covenant, to renew the relationship before they step into the Land. **And it's really very similar to what we are going to do today in Baptism.** We are going to renew the covenant here like they did back then. Then as now, making a covenant involves three things: a reminder of the past, a call to faithfulness in the present and a promise for the future. Let's look at each.

1) There's a reminder of the past. God is not a concept, an abstract "Ground of Being" or some airy-fairy cosmic muffin. He's actively and personally involved in

very concrete ways in the life of his people. He works in history, in space and time and Moses recounts some of the highlights of the last 40 years to the children of Israel to remind them of all God has done for them.

You'll notice the same thing as we renew the Baptismal Covenant. It reminds us what God has done in history for US. It focuses on the man Jesus of Nazareth, "who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried...The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven..." These are concrete actions God has taken in history on our behalf. **They call forth from us a response of faith and commitment to God.** That brings us to the next point.

2) There's a call to faithfulness in the present. Based on what God has done for you, how are you going to respond? Moses said, "THEREFORE keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him." That's simple isn't it? **Out of gratitude and love, walk in his ways.**

But what are God's ways that we should walk in? For Israel, that's what the rest of Deuteronomy is about. But for us **we have the Baptismal Covenant.** It lays out the path of faithful relationship with God that encompasses what you believe and how you live. The believe part is in the first part, the creed, the story of God's work in the world.

The live part is in the second bunch of questions. Will you continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship? Will you proclaim the good news? Will you love your neighbor as yourself and respect the dignity of every human being? If you want to be faithful in relationship with God this is how you should live.

That's what Paul is talking about in our Epistle lesson this morning. He urges us to a faithful lifestyle and offers practical ways of dealing with our problems we have being faithful like lying, anger, stealing, gossip and basically being jerks.

Paul sums up this lifestyle with a simple formula. You could put it on a bumper sticker. **"Be imitators of God as beloved children."** He elaborates, "Forgive others as God forgives us. Live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." Little children love to imitate their parents, don't they? But for big kids like us it's a little more difficult, isn't it?

When God says "Walk this way," he's showing us both where to walk and how. "Be imitators of God?" Who me, Lord? Be like You? How do we do that? I know we are made in the image of God, but actually imitating God? God's character is the standard for mine. That's a very high standard, indeed.

Our Collect this morning acknowledges that. "Grant to us, Lord the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you may by you be enabled to live according to your will." So God helps us and we

need that help, which brings us to the third part of the covenant

3) God's promise for the future. God calls us to a faithful relationship with him. As in marriage, we bind ourselves to God when we say, "I will." The great thing is that God does the same for us. It's a mutual commitment.

God binds himself with promises to us, which create a new future for us.

Moses said, "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams...a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates... a land where you can eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing." Sounds good, doesn't it? Moses is making Palestine sound like the Garden of Eden - or maybe like Loudoun County.

In the same way, in baptism we receive all of God's rich promises. Instead of giving us a little patch of green like the Promised Land, **God gives us EVERYTHING.** Everything? How? He gives us Jesus. He joins us to him in a bond so tight that we become one with Christ. So now what is true of Jesus becomes true of us. He shares all his stuff with us: his death and resurrection, his power and love, his Lordship over all creation. He cleans us up, makes us new and sets us on a new path in life that leads to eternal life.

That's what Jesus is talking about in our passage from the Gospel of John. Jesus says, "**Those who come to me I will never drive away.**" That's good news, especially after General Convention. It's also good news to people who approach Jesus tentatively, hesitantly, wondering if this good stuff could be true. Jesus promises there's no indifference or rejection.

That's true for young Alex coming to Jesus today on his 12th birthday. Alex, as you come to Jesus, he promises to accept you and never let you go. And for Joe and Tanya, as they bring their wonderful little guys to Jesus, they are sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever.

God wants a relationship with us. Like a loving parent, he wants to be near us and he's done everything necessary to make it happen. He promises us a full, whole, abundant life, a life lived faithfully in the ways of God, enjoying the God's great generosity and sharing it with others.

And the way you get it is by coming to Jesus, surrendering to him, entering into covenant with him, promising yourself to him and becoming one with him. All this happens when God embraces us in Baptism, and when we as Jesus said, believe and eat the bread of life. Well, that's what we are here to do today. **It's all right here, so let's get on with it. AMEN**