

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Sunday, 22 July 2018**  
**‘Wherever You Are’ and ‘Whoever You Are’**  
**Hebrew Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-9**  
**Christian Scriptures: Ephesians 2:11-22**

The first week on the job. First sermon.

This unique time reminds me of the minister who at his first service had a pitcher of water and a glass on the pulpit. As he preached, he drank until the pitcher of water was completely gone. After the service someone asked an elderly church member, “How did you like the new pastor?” “Fine,” she said, “but he’s the first windmill I ever saw that was powered by water.”

Yesterday, after my first week on the job, I read an article in *Business Insider* entitled “14 Things Successful People Do in the First Week of a New Job”.<sup>1</sup> Together, let us together see how I am doing so far.

1. Introduce yourself - Priscilla already submitted an article to the local paper doing just that!
2. Ask tons of questions. I asked someone on Friday what time worship is this morning.

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<sup>1</sup> Rachael Gillett and Diana Yukari, “14 Things Successful People Do in the First Week of a New Job”, *Business Insider*, 19 January 2017.

3. Be humble. I think I confided to Tina on Monday, “I have no idea what I’m doing!”
4. Befriend a veteran who can help you navigate the politics. I have met with both David and Jack, twice!
5. Set expectations with your boss (that’s you!) and staff. Well, I expect we will go very far and for long.
6. Analyse the make-up of your new team. I don’t know anything about make-up, so I’m going to ask my daughter, for whom who I buy lots of make-up, to do that one.
7. Figure out the coffee situation. I have been to The Works three times this past week.
8. Find your go-to Pharmacy and take-out lunch spot. Here’s my Walgreens card and there is a guy with a hot dog cart one block down.
9. Ask different groups to go to lunch. Bob Pu and I took care of that one on Friday. We both had hamburgers.
10. Get organised to set good habits. Each morning I have listened to National Public Radio, Fox News and devotional podcasts, I have run about 10km, and prayed in the sanctuary each morning before I started at my desk.

11. Start documenting and demonstrating that which you and the company have in common. That's easy, the gospel of Jesus Christ and I pray this sermon does just that.

12. Show your face as much as possible. I went to the Senior Centre with Roger Brown and had lunch with Loaves and Fishes.

13. Reinforce your new connection via social media. Those of you who followed me on Facebook raise your hands!

14. Reconnect with your former colleagues. I have been updating Jon and Bryan, who you all met on the first week, on my time with you all.

So, I think I have all the boxes ticked. Let us pray that this ministry is successful.

In all honesty, my success is not dependent on any of the above. My success is dependent on the Holy Spirit acting through you and I. What will determine our success is the degree to which we going foster the Realm of God in this church, community and world. The degree to which we foster the Realm of God will be dependent on the degree to which we hold dear two covenants. The first is, that God is with us 'wherever we are'. The second is, that God is with us 'whoever we are'.

There are so many things that divide us as a community of faith. I can name several: Age. Politics. Gender. Money. Insults. Pride. Grudges. Personal preferences. Backgrounds. Wounds. Insecurities. Truth be told, that which divides us can seem overwhelming.

Yet, I believe that the two covenants of God articulated in the scriptures are the key to us determining are our priorities and our future as a community of faith here at Centre Church. What binds us together? What strengthens us? What overcomes all that divides us? The answer is: the covenants that God has with us.

There are many covenants in the Bible. Just as there are many commandments; they can be summarized. Remember that Jesus summarized the commandments into two: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind' and 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Matthew 22:37-38). In our scriptures, there are many covenants or 'promise agreements'; they were made with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, King David (which we hear about today). Many of these covenants were geographically located. Adam and Eve - Garden of Eden. Noah, the Earth. Abraham, from Ur to Canaan. Moses, the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula. King David and later

Solomon, Jerusalem and the Temple. In all these covenants, God said to the people of faith, 'I am with you wherever you are'. In our scripture from second Samuel, we hear God saying to David, 'I have been with you from the get-go! I have been with you as you wandered as a shepherd boy. I have been with you as you contested with Saul. I have been with you as you established a capital in Jerusalem'. God says to David, 'I have been with you wherever you went' (II Samuel 7:9). And God says, 'I will continue to be faithful to you and to your descendants, such as your son, Solomon, so long as you continue in faithful relationship with me' (II Samuel 7:12-16). These covenants can be summarized to promise God's presence no matter where we are geographically situated.

The second covenant that we hear articulated in the Christian scriptures is more sophisticated and beautiful than the first. Not because it is better than the first covenant, but because it includes and thus surpasses it. The second covenant promises 'no matter *who* we are, God is with us'.

The first covenant was somewhat restrictive, for it generically included only the 'Abrahamic people'. In fact, it is the Abrahamic people, the Hebrews, the Jews, that are often referred to as the

**‘Covenant People’.** From their origins, their understanding of God was revolutionary in that God was not restricted to a geographical locality as others believed at the time. But this covenant, for all intents and purposes, was restricted to one people who practiced the rather, (well, I’m sure when it was a novelty) ‘unconventional’ custom of circumcision (Genesis 17:10-14).

The second covenant, inaugurated by Jesus Christ, and implemented by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, is the covenant that promises “no matter who you are, I am with you”. Jesus ate with sinners. Interacted with the blind. He associated with lepers, women, demoniacs (by the way, the listing of ‘women before to ‘demoniacs’ was in no way intentional!) under-educated, over educated, the poor, Samaritans, Syro-phoenicians, those divorced, children, traitors, working class, widows, even the enemy - even and especially the most marginalised - are all God’s favoured and are worthy of God’s love and salvation.

Wherever you are, *and* whoever you are.

Friends, number eleven of important things I should do on my first week on the job is I think the most important: “Start demonstrating and documenting that which you and the company

have in common”. I had a ministerial profile. You had a church profile. We noted that we had much in common. And what did we have in common? The Gospel of Jesus Christ! It is Jesus Christ who makes us one, no matter where we are and no matter who we are. And what we have in common is a passion to live-out the Gospel, the Good News. And what is the Good News? That God is with us no matter where we are and no matter who we are.

If we believe in the covenant told to King David by Nathan, that God is with us no matter where we are, we should as a community of faith reach out to those who perhaps have become estranged, who find themselves elsewhere, and say to them, you are welcome to return. We need to say to them, “For no matter where you have been, God’s presence has blessed you and we wish to honour God’s power in your life through continued fellowship with you”. The Apostle Paul states to the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, “For [Jesus Christ, the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together] is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14 and 21).

If we believe in the covenant told to the early church, that whether you are Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female, old

or young, than you are welcome at Centre Congregational Church (Galatians 3:26-28). Whether you are White, Black Asian or Hispanic, you are welcome. Whether you do or don't know how to operate that sound system. Whether gay or straight, welcome. Whether conventional or counter-cultural. Whether conservative or liberal, welcome. Whether you believe and can say all the articles of the Apostles Creed or not. Whether traditional or contemporary. Whether we agreed with the former ministers of this church or whether we did not. Whoever you are, you are welcome at Centre Congregational Church. Why? Because God communicates that "no matter where you are on life's journey" and no matter who we are, "you are welcome in our church".<sup>2</sup> We can best discern the will of God together, despite all that potentially divides us.

Made clear to me this past week is the degree to which you gathered here love this church. Let us proclaim "to those far and near" (Ephesians 2:17) and live-out that which we have in common: the Gospel and our love for this church.

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<sup>2</sup> Lillian Daniel, for the Stillspeaking Writers' Group, United Church of Christ, "So, You're Thinking about Joining the Church: A Guide to Exploring Church Membership in the United Church of Christ" brochure, Cleveland, OH.

Perhaps Thomas Merton said it the best: “We are already one. But we imagine we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are”.<sup>3</sup>

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded: Amen!

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, “The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton” ed. Patrick Hart, et al., (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1975), 308.