

But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.

⁷ *For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.*

⁸ *But God found fault with the people and said:*

*“The time is coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.*

⁹ *It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they did not remain faithful to my covenant,
and I turned away from them,*

declares the Lord.

¹⁰ *This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
after that time, declares the Lord.*

*I will put my laws in their minds
and write them on their hearts.*

I will be their God,

and they will be my people.

¹¹ *No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.*

¹² *For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”*

¹³ *By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear. (Hebrews 8:6-13)*

Jesus Our Great High Priest is the Mediator of a New Covenant

“Under new ownership.” Would it disturb you if you saw a sign like that in the windows of our church? How about, “Under new management”? You might be able to live with that one, because it could just mean we got a new pastor or elected a new church council, but the ownership is the same. It would be pretty disturbing if the ownership of our church changed – Jesus owns this church. All that we do here is designed to teach and preach the gospel – the new covenant, as Jeremiah called it. But what does that expression “the new covenant” say about the church in this world? There was an old covenant that the people of Israel lived under for 1500 years. But both of those covenants came from God. Both of them were for people who belonged to him. So the ownership didn’t change. But maybe we could say that the management did. God used Moses to implement the Old Covenant. God used his Son to implement the new one. God called human high priests, the descendants of Aaron, to bridge the gap between us sinners and God in the Old Covenant. God sent his Son to bridge that gap in the New Covenant. That new covenant is the point of our lesson tonight. It’s especially appropriate on Maundy Thursday because Jesus used this language to give us the special gift that is Holy Communion. **Jesus, our Great High Priest, is the mediator of a new covenant.**

I.

Most of our reading tonight from the book of Hebrews is really a quote from the book of Jeremiah. A few weeks ago, that Jeremiah quote served as our sermon text. I told you then that a covenant is a contract.

“You do this and I’ll do that.” That was the way the Mt. Sinai covenant worked. God told Israel to follow all those special laws about what they could eat and what they could wear and how they were supposed to worship and God promised to watch over them and protect them and grant them a level of blessing that even today would be amazing.

But that wasn’t the only time God made a covenant, even in the Old Testament. While the Mt. Sinai covenant worked the way most ancient covenants did and the way most modern contracts do, God’s covenants usually don’t work that way. God made a covenant with Adam and Eve: he promised to send the Seed of Woman, Jesus, to take our sins away. God made a covenant with Noah: he promised that he would never again destroy the world with a flood. God made a covenant with Abraham: he promised that all nations on earth would be blessed through his descendants, that is through Jesus.

Do you notice what makes all those covenants different from the Mt. Sinai covenant? In all of them, God does something but we don’t. Now, we do trust the work that God does and the promises he makes. But it’s not a “you do this and I’ll do that” situation. Imagine a contract like that today. The example I used a few weeks ago was buying a new car. You sign a contract in which you agree to pay so much a month and the dealership gives you ownership of the car and warranties it. Imagine if the dealership just gave you the car and the warranty. You didn’t have to pay anything or do anything except sign on the dotted line. Once they signed and notarized that agreement, they would be legally obligated to do what they said – even if they required nothing from you. That’s the way most of God’s covenants worked. He signs on the dotted line and saves us. He obligates himself to send his Son to die for all people everywhere – for you and me. He obligates himself to count Jesus’ perfect life and his innocent death as ours. We do nothing.

The one time that God did a “you do this and I’ll do that” covenant was a disaster. God totally lived up to his end of the deal. But Israel didn’t. Six hundred years before Jesus was born, God announced that the Mt. Sinai covenant would have to be replaced. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that means that the old covenant was obsolete and would soon disappear. God no longer offers Israel those ancient promises. In fact, the writer to the Hebrews says that the new covenant is “**founded on better promises**” than the old one was. Sure, peace and prosperity are wonderful gifts from God. We Americans have enjoyed more peace and prosperity than any nation on earth. But none of those things compare to the promises we have in Christ: eternal life in the presence of God who loves us.

What is the new covenant? Jeremiah said it and the book of Hebrews repeats it: “**I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**” During Holy Week, how can we focus on anything else? Jesus, the Great High Priest, put this new covenant into place for us. Everything he did on Maundy Thursday was a step to making that new covenant a reality.

Jesus gathered with his disciples for the last time before his death. He celebrated the Passover with them – the meal that remembered how God rescued his people from slavery in Egypt and that looked forward to the greater rescue that Jesus gives us from slavery to sin and death. He warned them that in a little while, they wouldn’t see him and that they couldn’t go, right away, to where he was going. He had a long conversation with them about all that was about to happen and all that his ministry among them meant. They didn’t understand very much of it then, but later it all came into focus for them. He washed their feet as a symbol of the ongoing need for forgiveness that every Christian has and he told them to wash each other’s feet – to offer forgiveness to each other over and over again until we reach heaven. Yet, he told them that they didn’t need a full bath anymore. They were already clean. They only needed to have their feet washed. We only need to deal with the challenges that today’s sins bring to our faith, because we are all baptized children of God. We are forgiven. We have a new and better covenant.

We have new and better promises: in Christ, God simply forgets all that we’re guilty of, even though we spend so many hours cursing our weaknesses and failures. In Christ, God simply see us as holy and perfect, even though there are so many days when we know how untrue that is. He sees only Jesus and he calls us his holy and perfect children. And that is true forever, and that means that every day, he will hear us and watch over us like a Father hears and watches over children he loves. **Jesus our great high priest is the mediator of that new covenant. He gives us better promises.**

II.

On that first Maundy Thursday, Jesus gave us a new way of remembering and celebrating that new covenant. He said, “**This is my blood of the covenant,**” – and Luke tells us he even put in that word *new* –

“This is the new covenant in my blood.” The new covenant is not just communion. But holy communion gives us that new covenant in a special and powerful way.

Now, why do we need this special, extra gift? In my last church, a very faithful member complained once to the chairman of our board of elders about my preaching. He said, “All he ever does is tell us we’re sinners and tell us we’re forgiven.” Now, he meant that as a criticism. And it might be one that you would agree with. You might be just as sick of it as he was. But you know what? I pray to the God that it was and is one hundred percent true. There is no greater complement that you could give my preaching that to say that. The chairman of my board of elders explained why. He asked that man, “Well, did you sin this week?” That’s why you and I need to hear that gospel message week in and week out. And that’s why Jesus gave us communion to celebrate over and over again until we leave this world. We just keep sinning. And not just every week, every day. We sin even though we know better. We sin even though it makes us hypocrites. We sin and then we look down our self-righteous noses at all those people out there in the world who rage against what God says about marriage and abortion and all kinds of other things. We sin and we deserve God’s punishment in hell forever.

But God gave us a new covenant: he has forgiven all our sins. He has forgotten all our wickedness. He sent Jesus to die in our place and pay all that we owe for all that sin. He sent Jesus to shed his blood and wash it all away. In the greatest miracle of cosmic bookkeeping ever recorded, God credited all that payment that Jesus made to our account. So all that sin is gone forever.

In holy communion, God gives us the very blood that Jesus shed on the cross to wash our sins away. He gives us the very body that Jesus offered as the payment for our sins. It’s not just a symbol. That body and that blood are truly there. They are truly given to us again so that we can truly know today, that we are forgiven. Now, it’s no different from the forgiveness I just announced to you. But Luther once explained it this way: when I preach a sermon and announce the gospel, whoever grasps it, grasps it. If you hear me say you’re forgiven and understand it, great. But if just at that moment your child drops a hymnal and it makes a big thud and everyone turns to look and you melt in embarrassment while you bend down to pick it up, you might not hear me say you’re forgiven. If your mind is wandering and you’re just wondering how much longer you can keep your eyes open, since you got up at the crack of dawn to go to work today, you might miss that gospel message. Or if you’re wrestling with some secret sin that torments you, you might very well hear me say that you are forgiven. But then you say to yourself, “Pastor doesn’t mean me. If he knew what I did, he would never say that to me.” So you cheat yourself of the forgiveness Jesus gives you.

But when you kneel here at the communion rail and I place the body of Christ in your hand and I give you his blood to drink, there is no question who Jesus is talking to. The new covenant is yours. God has forgiven you. God has forgotten your wickedness, including the very sin that torments you at that moment.

Jesus knew we would need to hear that message again and again, so on the night he was betrayed, he made sure we had it in this sacrament. Think of the love that went into that institution. We know Jesus was already thinking ahead to what was coming the next day. Not only did he tell his disciples what would happen, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he sweat great drops of blood and prayed for strength. Yet, with all that on his mind, Jesus stopped to institute communion for us. He turned his attention to our cares and our worries and our guilt. He gave us a gift that would comfort to us over and over again for as long as we live here. He loved us that much even on that night.

In the end, the new covenant is the gospel. It’s announcing forgiveness. That gospel in word and sacrament has the power of God built into it so it never leaves our hearts untouched. **Jesus, our Great High Priest, is the mediator of a new covenant. He applies that covenant to our hearts.** So every Christian congregation is under new management, but not new ownership. We are under the management of grace. We are under the management of forgiveness. We are under the care and concern of Christ – every day until he returns. Amen.