

## Broken Promises

Philippians 2:1-13 & Matthew 21:23-32

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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World Communion Sunday

Pastor Tom Thews

### Philippians 2:1-13 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, <sup>2</sup> then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed — not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence — continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

### Matthew 21:23-32 (NIV)

<sup>23</sup> Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him. “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

<sup>24</sup> Jesus replied, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>25</sup> John's baptism — where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?”

They discussed it among themselves and said, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn't you believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘From men’ — we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We don't know.”

Then [Jesus] said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. <sup>28</sup> What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ <sup>29</sup> ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

<sup>30</sup> “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”

### Broken Promises

That creative writer Father Andrew Greeley tells a story — a parable, really — about two sisters who worked as babysitters in their community. A young couple had recently moved into the neighborhood. They hired the younger of the two sisters to sit with their children. Imagine their surprise when they came home to find their home a complete mess, with their kids looking haggard, and the babysitter half asleep on the couch.

The next day, however, the children excitedly told their parents about how much fun they had had with the new babysitter, and how she had helped them do some assignments including saying their prayers. But this did not change the parent’s decision to fire the babysitter.

The next time the couple needed a sitter they hired the older sister. They were greatly impressed when they got home this time to discover the house was tidy and the kids were already asleep. “The kids have been like angels,” the older girl announced, and, gratefully, the couple gave her an extra tip.

The next morning the kids came complaining to their parents, accusing the babysitter of yelling at them with swear words, calling her boyfriend instead of helping them with their assignments, and then forcing them to go to bed early while she went outside and smoked and talked with some of her friends.

Now, if you were in the shoes of these parents, which of the babysitters will you hire the next time?

Jesus was in a conversation with the chief priests and the elders of the people and He told them a parable about a man who had two sons. The man went to the first one and said, “Son, I want you to work in the vineyard today.” The older son was in a somewhat rebellious mood and answered, “No way!” But afterwards he felt bad about his response and went and did what he was expected to do.

The father went to the second son, the younger boy, and made the same request of him. “Sure, Pop,” said the second son, but he never did go into the vineyard. “Which son,” asked Jesus of the chief priests and the elders, “did what his father wanted?”

And the chief priests and elders gave the only possible correct answer. It was the first son who did what his father wanted.

Then Jesus looked the chief priests and the elders in the eye and said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you

to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him . . .”

Interesting parable. We always enjoy it when Jesus sticks it to the chief priests and elders or to the scribes and Pharisees. Unless, of course, the story is such that we suspect Jesus could be talking to you and me as well. Let’s see if that could be the case here. In this passage there seems to be three basic lessons here.

#### THE FIRST IS THE IMPORTANCE OF DOING WHAT WE SAY WE ARE GOING TO DO.

Could that ever apply to any of us? An unknown writer tells the story of a young widow whose husband died suddenly and left her to raise their two children. She told her minister that during the wake for her husband, several family members and close friends came up to her and told her that they would be there for her. During the following years, however, some people were there for her when she needed them, including some people who never made that promise, but there were others who were so eager during the wake to offer help, but never called or visited.

Does that sound possible — that somebody could make a promise like that and not keep it? Does that cause anyone just a twinge of guilt? My guess is it does. It is so easy to glibly say, “Oh, yes, I’ll pray for you,” and never pray. Or to say, “I’ll be by to check on you,” and never go by. “The road paved with good intentions...” “Sure, Pop, I’ll go . . .”

“We live in an era of unkept promises,” says Canadian pastor Noel Sterne. “Nations sign important treaties and then break them at will. And many couples show little regard for their wedding vows. In this kind of society, we who are God’s people should be known for keeping our promises.”

Pastor Sterne uses the example of the brilliant Christian scholar and writer C. S. Lewis. Lewis, of course, was the author of several literary classics such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Space Trilogy* and *The Screwtape Letters*. Sterne notes that Lewis took the truth that Christians should be known for keeping their promises seriously.

“His biography tells of the suffering he endured because he kept a promise he had made to a buddy during World War I. This friend was worried about the care of his wife and small daughter if he should be killed in battle, so Lewis assured him that if that were to happen he would look after them. As the war dragged on, the man was killed. True to his word, Lewis took care of his friend’s family. Yet no matter how helpful he tried to be, the woman was ungrateful, rude, arrogant, and domineering. Through it all, Lewis kept forgiving her. He refused to let her actions become an excuse to renege on his promise.”

Many of us would have renege, wouldn’t we? What is more frustrating than to try our best to help someone and to be met with gross ingratitude? Perhaps it is a child, or an aging parent, perhaps it is a sibling or a friend. Don’t they know that the time and the money that we devote to them is our sacrificial gift because we care for them? Evidently not. They sure don’t act like it.

C. S. Lewis kept his promise. He had no power to control his friend's widow's response to his kindnesses. But he did have the power to choose to keep his word. It's important that we do what we say.

IN FACT ONE COULD MAKE THE ARGUMENT THAT THE KEY TO A SUCCESSFUL LIFE IS TO BE A PROMISE KEEPER.

Certainly that is true in important relationships like marriage and parenthood. In one of his plays author Thornton Wilder has one of his characters say, "I married you because you gave me a promise. That promise made up for your faults. And the promise I gave you made up for mine. Two imperfect people got married, and it was the promise that made the marriage. And when our children were growing up, it wasn't a house that protected them; and it wasn't our love that protected them — it was that promise."

That's true in marriage and family life, but it's also true in every other aspect of life as well.

Sometime back, the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, released a study of twenty-one high potential executives who were terminated or forced to retire early from their companies. The one universal character flaw, or unforgivable sin, which always led to their downfall was not doing something that they had promised. It's a matter of character; it's a matter of integrity.

One of the saddest commentaries on our time is that we can cite so few people who are people with unquestionable integrity; particularly people in the public eye. That would have been unthinkable in earlier times.

Let me tell you something about President Abraham Lincoln that you may not know. Before he went into politics, Lincoln and another man bought a general store in New Salem, Illinois. Lincoln and his business partner attempted to run the store as a profitable business. But owing to unwise investments and general mismanagement, the store finally went under.

Not long thereafter Lincoln's partner died, leaving him under a mountain of debt. But unlike many others who went bankrupt in frontier ventures and skipped town to escape their creditors, Lincoln promised to repay every cent he owed. He fulfilled this promise even though it took him more than fifteen years to retire the debt. When Abraham Lincoln made a commitment, his word was good as gold. Lincoln was a promise keeper if there ever was one. No wonder he became, in the estimation of many, our greatest president.

Is it too much to expect of our public officials to exhibit that kind of integrity today? What about leaders in business or in education or any other place of responsibility, including in the home? Oh, every once in a while we hear about someone who exhibits such character. When it happens, it is like the proverbial breath of fresh air.

There was a beautiful story in the magazine *In Touch* a few years back. It was about Coach Cleveland Stroud of the Rockdale County, Georgia, Blue Collar Bulldogs. Stroud was coach for 18 years before his basketball team made it to the state championship.

Stroud recalls that “it was the perfect night” when they won that championship. “A night you dream of.” He was carried around the gym on the shoulders of his triumphant players and their proud parents. The local paper put his picture on the front page.

But the excitement was short-lived. Two months after the championship, during a routine grade check, Stroud discovered that one player was academically ineligible. The player had only played 45 seconds during the regional qualifying tournament, but that was 45 seconds more than he should have played.

Stroud says, “I thought it was all ruined. I went through a phase where I was really depressed.” He struggled with what to do next. His commitment to integrity led him to make the right decision.

“Winning is the most important thing for any coach,” he says. “But your principles have to be higher than your goals.” He reported the error to the league and the Bulldogs forfeited their trophy.

When the team lamented their loss in the locker room, he told them, “You’ve got to do what is honest, what is right, and what the rules say. People forget the scores of basketball games, but they don’t ever forget what you are made of.”

Thank God for coaches like Cleveland Stroud. Thank God for people of character whoever they may be.

THAT IS ONE OF THE PRIMARY LEGACIES THAT WE LEAVE TO THOSE WHO COME AFTER US — THE REPUTATION OF ALWAYS SEEKING TO DO WHAT IS RIGHT.

In his book, *I Almost Missed the Sunset*, gospel song writer Bill Gaither tells about the legacy that he received from his grandfather. Gaither says that he and his wife Gloria had been married a couple of years. They were teaching school in Alexandria, Indiana, where Bill had grown up, and they wanted a piece of land where they could build a house.

Bill noticed the parcel south of town where cattle grazed, and he learned it belonged to a ninety-two-year-old retired banker named Mr. Yule. Mr. Yule owned a lot of land in the area, and he gave the same speech to everyone who tried to buy land from him: “I promised the farmers they could use it for their cattle.”

Bill and Gloria decided to pay Mr. Yule a visit at the bank. Although he was retired, he spent a couple of hours each morning in his office. He looked at them over the top of his bifocals.

Bill introduced himself and told Mr. Yule they were interested in a piece of his land. “Not selling,” Mr. Yule said pleasantly. “Promised it to a farmer for grazing.”

“I know,” Bill said, “but we teach school here and thought maybe you’d be interested in selling it to someone planning to settle in the area.”

Mr. Yule pursed his lips and stared at Bill. “What’d you say your name was?” he asked.

“Gaither. Bill Gaither.” “Hmmm. Any relation to Grover Gaither?” asked the banker. “Yes, sir. He was my granddad.”

Mr. Yule put down his paper and removed his glasses. “Interesting. Grover Gaither was the best worker I ever had on my farm. Full day’s work for a day’s pay. So honest. What’d you say you wanted?” Bill told him again. This time Mr. Yule said, “Let me do some thinking on it, then come back and see me.”

Bill came back within the week, and Mr. Yule told him he had had the property appraised. Bill held his breath. “How does \$3,800 sound?” he asked. “Would that be okay?”

If that was per acre, Bill thought, he would have to come up with nearly \$60,000! “\$3,800?” Bill repeated. “Yup,” said Mr. Yule. “Fifteen acres for \$3,800.” Bill knew the property had to be worth at least three times that. He readily accepted.

Nearly three decades later, Bill Gaither and his son walked together through that beautiful, lush property that had once been pasture land. “Benjy,” Bill said to his son, “you’ve had this wonderful place to grow up on through nothing that you’ve done, but because of the good name of a great-granddad you never met.”

My friends, you and I won’t leave a more important legacy to our children and grandchildren than a reputation for seeking in all ways to do the right thing.

Jesus told a parable about two brothers. One told his father that he wouldn’t work in the vineyard, but he repented, and did do the work his father asked him to do. His brother said, “Sure, Pop,” when he was given the same assignment, but never did. Which, asked Jesus, did the will of his father? It’s important to do what we say we will do, to be a promise keeper. This is the most important legacy that we can leave the world.

This is Worldwide Communion Sunday. As we take the sacrament with fellow Christians around the world, it would be a good time for us to reflect on the promises we have made to God. Have we kept them? Are there new promises we should make today? God bless everyone of you.