“Reforming our Covenant with God”
Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 3:19-28, John 8:31-36

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From the Pulpit
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Robert Browne is not a household name to students of the Protestant Reformation. But it should be. In fact, everyone of us, as Congregationalist Christians, should know about this man. Browne was an Anglican priest who left the ranks of the Church of England in 1579 to form a group of Congregational Christians then known as The Brownists. These early Congregationalists fought the heavy hand of a Church led by the King and felt that they, as Christians, should organize congregation by congregation.
A majority of the Separationists aboard the Mayflower which landed in Plymouth Massachusetts in 1620 were Brownists. In fact, the people we call Pilgrims were known into the 20th Century as the Brownist Emigration.

In 1581, Browne and his followers moved from England to Middleburg in the Netherlands to escape persecution and they organized a congregation conceived on the New Testament model of church, but they broke up within two years based on too many internal dissensions. Interestingly, Browne only stayed with these beliefs from 1579-1585 when he returned to the Church of England to serve out his life as an Anglican Priest. Although Robert Browne returned to the Mother Church, his adherents went on to become our forebears in faith.

One of the foundational beliefs of the Brownists and Congregationalists who followed is that we are a covenantal church, not a creedal church. We gather around our Congregational Covenant to be the church as opposed to following a Creed. In our case, our covenant at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ has stood for 169 years. Written by our 42 founders and modeled after many Congregational Covenant before it. There are three sentences. Our covenant simply reads:

_We covenant with the Lord Jesus Christ and one another, and bind ourselves in the presence of God to live together in all God’s ways as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit and holy scripture. The church acknowledges that all members have the right of individual interpretation of the principles of the Christian faith and respects them in their honest convictions. In accordance with the teaching_
of our Lord, the church recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion.

First, Our Covenant is with Jesus Christ and one another. We are bound together by God to live TOGETHER in ALL God’s ways – as we find them revealed by The Holy Spirit (first) and Holy Scripture (second). That’s very powerful. First, this says we are trinitarian – God, Jesus, Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. We follow Jesus, the binding love of God and the revelation of the Holy Spirit – then Holy Scripture. We also put the Holy Spirit before the Holy Scriptures in our Equation of covenant.

The middle sentence is particularly interesting and unique. It is a sentence about freedom of belief. We acknowledge that each and every one of us “right” to interpret “the principles of the Christian faith” and Each one of us also agrees to respect the others in their honest convictions. This a mature interpretation of faith in Christ. I am not your theological overseer. The Church does not make you toe the line and agree to a certain set of beliefs – or hit the road. This is an open understanding and an open theology. We are all in this together, but each of us has a “right” to interpret the principles of our faith differently – based on our honest convictions. Someone once told me he struggled to understand our “Open and Affirming” approach to church (although he had grown to like it). He said, “I grew up in a church which was closed and condemning.”

So, I wonder, what do you hold to be the principles of the Christian faith and how do you interpret them? And in stating what you believe and how you interpret, do you know what my interpretations are and have you made room for my beliefs and
my interpretations in your covenant of faith with me and with all of us?

Finally, over covenant wraps up with a rather simple sentence, “In accordance with the teachings of Lord, the church recognizes two sacraments – Baptist and Holy Communion.” This is truly a statement of faith. Jesus taught us (I would say “commanded us”) to do three things – baptize, celebrate communion and what? What is the third – ‘LOVE ONE ANOTHER.” The first two contain both the spiritual and physical elements of faith. The last one is a way of life.

On this Reformation Day 2021, we are blessed with our Covenant Theology.

Amen.