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Sermon: Action Pact

A kindergarten teacher announces to her class, "Tomorrow, we will have show and tell. I would like everyone to bring in a symbol of his or her religious faith."  
The next day, a little boy steps forward. "Hi, my name is David. I'm Jewish, and this is a yarmulke."  
Another little boy comes forward. "Hi, my name is Kevin. I'm a Catholic, and this is a crucifix."  
Finally, a little girl steps to the front. "Hi, my name is Susie. I'm a UCC Congregationalist, and this is a casserole."

Casserole is funny, yes, but could it have a deeper meaning than what is immediately apparent?  
What might the casserole represent?  
To some, it might represent fellowship and the social aspect of church.  
To some it might represent communion - a sacred meal, a coming together at the table – the symbol of Christian community.  
To some it might represent social activism – feeding the hungry, offering the extras of one's own kitchen to be shared with those whose kitchen cabinets are bare.

Who knew that a casserole could be so complex and symbolic a metaphor for church identity? This church has an identity. This is a UCC – a United Church of Christ – church. What in the world does that mean – to us and to you?  
We have been working through this question of UCC identity during the last four weeks in Adult Education class. Now don't get worried, particularly if you were not in any of these classes - we have not made any unilateral decisions on your behalf – that's not the UCC way. Rather, what has emerged out of the conversation is realization that it is so important to have this conversation. Not to set ourselves apart, but to bring ourselves together.

One of the central identifying words of the United Church of Christ is the word, "covenant." We are a group of faithful people held together in congregations, associations, and synods through this notion of covenant. It is no coincidence that Covenant is also a word with central purpose in the scriptures. So, let's review some Biblical covenants to wrap our brains around this idea of covenant in faith.

God's first covenants with humanity involve rules. With Adam and Eve: "here's this great garden. We can hang out, all your needs will be taken care of. All I ask of you is that you don't eat from that tree of knowledge over there." Did God break the covenant? No. Did humanity? Yep.  
So, God tried a new method – this time with Abraham. God promised to bless him and to make Abraham the father of a great nation. In exchange, Abraham had to be obedient to God – to go where God led him and to follow God's rules around sacrifice, circumcision,

and naming. Now Abraham and his offspring did a pretty good job of staying in the “rule covenant” with God. But it didn’t take very many generations for humanity to rebel.

We come to the next big covenant between the Israelites and God. This one involves Moses and God’s promise to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and take them into the promised land. And in exchange, the people had to follow: a bunch of rules, 10 very important commandments, and countless purity laws. And, they had to be fearful and worshipful of God, and God alone. Were they? Sometimes. They did okay some days and other days they messed up. But you know rules – they are meant to be broken. So God kept writing down the rules and telling Moses to remind the people, and later telling Joshua, and later the prophets. And the people tried - and they didn’t worship other Gods and they followed a lot of the rules.

But something was missing. This just wasn’t quite the connection that God had been looking for with God’s people. So God came up with a new covenant to make with humanity – and Mark read the prophesy of this new covenant in the passage from Jeremiah - not a covenant of external obedience or rules but a “law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.”

This is the beginning of the switch from the idea of covenant as rules to the idea of covenant as relationship. If God’s law is written on our hearts, we do not have to check some book or offer some animal sacrifice to figure out how to get close to God – God is already within us – closer than our next heartbeat. We no longer need to learn who God is – we already know. And that knowledge is what drives us to seek a deeper and deeper relationship with God. This is what God has wanted from the beginning - not just to do what God says, but to seek a significant relationship with God in our daily lives.

There’s one more story in the Bible that drives this whole idea of covenantal relationship home. That is the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the quintessential example of a person in complete covenantal relationship with God. The knowledge of God is certainly written on his heart and that knowledge, that heart relationship is what empowers him to follow God. Jesus wore his heart on his sleeve, so to speak, too. So all who knew Jesus, knew God. And Jesus’ obedience to God was not grounded in following the rules, but in commitment to the relationship.

Consider a committed relationship in your own life. Is it not true that the real day to day lived relationship is much more than the promises you made when you exchanged vows? Of course - because it is a covenant that is written on your heart. You are in covenant with that person because you have made mutual promises: We will be here for each other. We will support each other. We will work out our disagreements in respectful ways. We will treat each other in kind and loving ways.

God doesn’t want us to obey the rules. God wants a relationship. God wants give and take, honesty and effort, commitment and covenant.

Okay, I get it, you might say. We are supposed to be in covenantal relationship with God. That's fine. I am. I know God. God knows me. We're good. But we started this conversation talking about covenant as it relates to the UCC. So, the covenantal relationship extends beyond the individual relationship between a person and God and into the relationship with the faith community.

Wait a minute – what did she say? Self and church? I am in covenant with my church? Covenant, meaning rules, right? That's easy, I can do that. What are the church rules? I am supposed to show up, particularly on Sundays. I am supposed to give some money. I am supposed to sit on the occasional committee. I am supposed to donate food or blankets or time. Oh yes, covenant as rules and even as obligation are very easy in community.

Not so fast. We, along with God, had moved to the definition of covenant as relationship. Now this is a little more difficult in community. This requires much more of the “heart work” where God has written God's laws. If we understand the word, Covenant, as relationship instead of rules, it actually describes HOW we relate in community –  
When we agree- and are united  
When we are coming together – and are uniting  
And most importantly, when we disagree – and are divided.

Oh wait, but Christians don't ever disagree, do they –especially not Christians in the same church? We all believe the same tenets, the same creeds, the same book. Right? Wrong. The passage I shared with you from Acts tells us that even in the very early stages of the church, there was dispute and disagreement about meanings, rules, and laws. But to worry about the rules is to miss the point. Even back then, Peter tells the gathered community what God has already told us through the prophets – it's not about rules, it's about relationship: “And God, who knows the human heart (because God has written God's law of relationship there) testified to them (the Gentiles – translation: everybody) by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, and in cleansing their hearts by faith, he has made no distinctions between them and us.”

God doesn't make distinctions, people do. God has given the Holy Spirit to everyone. From the least to the greatest and has written God's law upon the human heart. You don't need to be taught to know God. You don't need someone to tell you who God is. You already know. But what you don't know is WHAT to do with it. And WHERE you want to commit in a covenantal relationship to do that work.

Let's get back to the casserole. Some people see their faith life as a trip to the spiritual buffet, a consumable product. Some days certain practices look good – oh I'll have extra scoop of that. Other times, certain communities look good – oh, I've never tried that dish. Other times, the spiritual journey is taken solo – no thank you, I don't care for that. And that may be fine for them for a time. But inevitably, it becomes not enough. Why do you suppose?

Because we do not come to the table to take God in, to consume what God offers. God's law is already within us – remember? It is written on our hearts. We come to the buffet on our way to the communal table of our faith community. We come to the table for conversation, fellowship, prayer, debate. We come to the table to meet others who are living out the law of God that is written on their hearts. We come to work together to figure out what that “knowledge of God” is calling us to do. We do not come to the table to bring God inside our own private worlds, we come here to send God out into the world through us.

And we might not like all the ingredients in the casserole, but we try it because we are in covenant with our sister who made it. And we might have outgrown animal crackers, but we know through our covenant of a few who still need them at the table. And we might have different food on our plate than on the plate of our brother next to us, and this difference evokes a lively discussion on flavors and tastes and palates. And when we have conflict, we can still sit together at the table. We can allow it to be the beginning of a conversation, the beginning of a relationship rather than allowing it to be the end.

If our participation in a community of faith is grounded in covenantal relationship, we cannot walk away because of the differences among us. We grow deeper by the differences among us because we come to KNOW one another. I begin to understand what is written by God on your heart. And you begin to understand what God has written on my heart. And that's a recipe for a casserole I'd like to share with you.