




*The Tie
That Binds*

2013 Fall Worship & Study Series



The Tie That Binds

Introduction - Darren Cushman Wood

The Kenosha Yacht Club meets on the second floor of the Breakwater Bar and Grill. The walls are covered with the portraits of the past commodores surrounded by different types of nautical knots. The slogan for the club is 'the port of friendship.'

The love of God in Christ forms a spiritual knot that binds us together. This study explores the various ways we are connected to God and one another. In the Bible, these relationships are known as 'the covenant.' A covenant is marked by promises and obligations that go beyond the narrow exchange involved in a contract. Through Christ we are invited to be in covenant with God and one another.

We live in a world of contracts. While there are similarities, a covenant is different from a contract. The purpose of a contract is to spell out specific terms of an agreement so that if either side violates the agreement the other party is free to end the relationship. A covenant spells out how to stay in and perpetuate the relationship. Contracts are intentionally limited but covenants are meant to be expansive in their promises and obligations. Contracts regulate an exchange; covenants form relationships.

God provides a covenant, not a contract, with us through Jesus Christ. This study explores how we more fully live into that covenant relationship with God and one another.



Knot Tying Lesson One: God is a Covenant Maker

Read:

- Exodus 6:1-8 (-13)
- Matthew 26:26-29

Introduction:

Sometimes a name says a lot. If you are a 'Jr.' it tells everyone to whom you are related. What we call God says a lot about how we see God. In this session's readings, God's name is 'Yahweh' and we know Yahweh through Jesus the Christ. We learn that God is a promise keeper who always ties up the loose ends of our covenant.

When you were growing up did you have a nickname? If so, what was it and why did you get it?

Notes:

God is a covenant-maker. Throughout the Bible we see God making agreements and keeping promises (even when the people did not keep their promises to God). God is keeping a long held promise when Moses hears, "I have remembered my covenant....and I will free you." Yahweh made a binding agreement generations earlier with Abraham and Sarah to give them descendants and land. Later, when their descendants were

enslaved, God was following through on that commitment. In this act of liberation, they were learning the meaning of God's name, Yahweh (in most English translations appears as LORD), and replaced the pharaoh as their only sovereign. They had been in bondage but new ties were formed between Yahweh and the people.

The idea of covenants was not unique for the Hebrews. Nations in the ancient Near East often made covenants. Sometimes those covenants were between a more powerful nation which offered protection for a weaker nation in exchange for tribute. The format of that type of covenant formed the basis for God's covenant with Israel. However, the motivation was love. God's steadfast love (Hebrew, 'chesed') initiated the covenantal relationship (e.g. Deut. 7:7-12).

Generations later, God deepened the covenant with greater promises to King David and his descendants. God constantly called the people through the prophets to maintain covenant fidelity.

God's faithful love is embodied in Jesus. His life, death and resurrection is a continuation and fulfillment of the covenant of love we see in the Exodus story. It is no accident that Jesus celebrated his martyrdom in the Passover meal in which he draws an analogy between his blood and body and the Passover which marked the original covenant. And like the first exodus, his death and resurrection liberates all people. The God we see in the Exodus

story and in the communion meal is the same loving God who has always kept promises.

Questions:

1. In your experiences of God, which has had more impact: reflecting on how God has helped you in the past, or thinking about God's promises for the future?

2. What was the covenant promise God made to Moses' ancestors?

3. What caused God to remember the covenant?

4. What does this story reveal about the nature of God? God refers the specific name Moses was given—Yahweh. What image or title would you give to God today based on this story?

5. What would the opposite view of God be? Have you known someone who saw God this way?

6. Have you ever felt like God forgot to fulfill a promise?

7. How is Jesus reinterpreting the Exodus and Passover in his Last Supper?

8. The meal is a culmination of his ministry and relationship with the disciples. How was Jesus the embodiment of God's faithfulness?

9. The bread and cup are tangible symbols of God's promises and faithfulness in keeping those promises. Can you think of tangible symbols of other promises we make / made to us by others? Is it important for us to have tangible symbols of promises?

Focus of the Week:

Which Bible character best illustrates God's faithfulness to you:

This week, meditate on the moments in your life when you have seen or felt God's faithfulness. Close your meditation with this simple prayer of thanksgiving:

"God of [name of the Bible character], thank you for being faithful to me."



Knot Tying Lesson Two: Our Covenant of Hearts & Hands

Read:

- Deuteronomy 30:11-20
- John 15:5-11

Introduction:

When I was a child I had a hard time sitting still in class. Try as hard as I could, I was constantly being corrected by my teachers for not obeying the rules. Only time and self-discipline (and God!) changed my behavior. Their instructions had to be internalized before I could follow their rules.

When you were young, did you struggle with being obedient?

Notes:

When we use the word 'heart' it usually refers to our emotional side. In the Bible, the heart meant much more than that. The heart was seen as the seat of the will, the bearer of one's priorities, as well as your passion (In the Old Testament, the bowels was often the reference for mere emotions). To say that God's commandments are 'in your heart for you to observe' (Deut. 30:16) means that you have made it your central priority to obey God.

The commandments and laws are an expression of God's love. God gave concrete instruction to the people so that they would know how to participate in the covenant which God had initiated when they were liberated from Egypt. Obedience to the commandments is our ethical response to God's liberating love and faithfulness.

Moses reassured the people that they were 'not too hard for you' to obey (v. 11). As a part of the ritual of making a covenant, witnesses had to be present. The cosmos served as the witness for the making of a divine-human covenant. The ultimate purpose of the commandments was to preserve the life of the people (v. 19). This kind of obedience was completely different from the obedience to the pharaoh which perpetuated slavery and death.

Time and again, it became impossible to remain completely obedient. God came in Jesus Christ to empower us to keep our part of the covenant and receive the fulfillment of living in a faithful relationship with God. In John's Gospel, Jesus makes a connection between himself and the God they knew from the ancient stories. Just as God had told Moses 'I Am who I Am' (Ex. 3:14), Jesus also referred to himself as 'I Am' (e.g. 'I am....the bread of life [6:35], the light of the world [8:12], the gate [10:7], the good shepherd [10:14], the resurrection and the life [11:25]). During the last supper, he added, 'I am the vine' to describe how he empowers us to be obedient. Notice how many times the word 'abide' appears (11 times). Christ abiding in our hearts enables us to do God's will, and

in turn, this gives us life, just like a branch remains vibrant because it is attached to the vine.

Questions:

1. What kinds of promises do we make to God? Should any of them be discarded?

2. In Deuteronomy 30:11-14, what unspoken objection is answered?

3. Israel finds God's word 'in your mouth and in your heart'. What does that mean? Why both, why not just one or the other?

4. How is choosing obedience the same as choosing life (v. 19)?

5. What does it mean to abide/remain in Christ? How does the metaphor of vine and bearing fruit illustrate this way of living?

6. What happens to us when we try to 'keep God's commandments' without 'abiding in God's love'?

7. What makes it tough for you to keep your promises to God?

8. What role does your prayer life play in being an ethical person?

9. Jesus described abiding and obeying as the stuff that will make our joy 'complete.' Contrast his view of joy with how society defines joy.

Focus of the Week:

This week, take an inventory of your spiritual practices. Over the past 12 months has my....

	Increased	Decreased	The Same
Worship attendance			
Scripture Reading			
Prayer			
Fellowship with Others			
Giving			
Serving			
Other:			



Knot Tying Lesson Three: The Church is a Covenant Community

Read:

- Jeremiah 34:13-17
- Ephesians 2:11-22

Introduction:

The members in my first appointment had a habit of sitting far apart on Sunday morning. An individual here, a couple there and so on with rows of pews between them. They were not angry with each other, nor were they shy. On the contrary, they were very friendly. After learning their stories, I realized that they sat in the spots where they had always sat with their friends and family members when the church was fuller. With the passage of time, loved ones who once sat beside them died, but they continued to sit in the same locations as if they were saving a place for a friendly ghost.

Who do you sit next to on Sunday morning?

Notes:

Israel was the people of God but they did not always remember it. Jeremiah reminded them of this during a crisis. Jerusalem was

under siege in 588 b.c. by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II who dominated the region for over 40 years (625-539 b.c.). Earlier, King Zedekiah tried to rebel against the Babylonians, but it backfired and chapter 32-35 describes life under siege. Eventually, Nebuchadnezzar's forces burned Jerusalem to the ground, captured Zedekiah and deported Jews back to Babylon.

It was more than geopolitics for Jeremiah. The Babylonian siege was God's punishment for Israel violating the covenant. Zedekiah had enacted a covenant which called for slaves to be set free as a symbol of their renewed dedication to God. As soon as Nebuchadnezzar temporarily lifted the siege, Zedekiah and those in power reneged on that covenant.

Jeremiah spoke up and reminded them of the older and larger covenant that God made with them when they were liberated from Egypt generations earlier. According to that covenant, God demanded that they practice routine manumission for slaves (See Ex. 21:2; Deut. 15:1, 12). The irony is that they had forgotten their identity as God's covenant people who were the children of liberation and the stewards of freedom.

The definition of God's covenant people was expanded by Paul. Gentiles (those called "the uncircumcision") were 'aliens from the commonwealth of Israel' and thus could not be saved because they were outside of the covenant. But Jesus' death expanded the covenant to include them and created 'one new humanity.' Paul uses the old metaphor of the people of God to describe the Church. We are 'citizens' of this new commonwealth; we are members of

this covenantal household. Just as the temple in Jerusalem was the center of the nation's life and faith, now Christ is the cornerstone of a new temple in which we all have a place. The metaphors convey a set of relationships based on God's expansive love and our commitment to support one another in God's love.

Questions:

1. For you, what metaphor best describes the church?

2. How is the church's relationship with God similar to Israel's relationship with God in the Old Testament? How is it different?

3. Ephesians speaks about Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians being united in 'one new humanity' in Christ. Where are the divisions in churches today? What does it mean for us at North to be united in Christ?

4. Ephesians uses the metaphor of a household and a commonwealth to describe the church. What do these images tell us about the nature of the church?

5. We are a part of many different groups, but God calls the church to be unique in society. In what ways is the church similar to and different from:

A family

A corporation

A civic organization


6. What does it mean for you to be a member at North?

7. Do our members tend to see church membership as a covenant or a contract (for an explanation of the difference see the introduction to this study)?

8. Our membership vows say that we will 'faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service.' How do you as an individual member put each of those into practice? Which one is the hardest for you?
9. How do we treat members who have become inactive (what does it mean to be 'inactive' at North)? How do we treat members who are going through hard times? Are some members overlooked?
10. When there is a conflict or disagreement in the church, how should we handle it? Can you think of a time when it has been handled properly? When it has been mishandled?

Focus of the Week:

Consult the church calendar (on the website or in the Happenings) and each day pray for the meetings and ministries taking place at the church.



Knot Tying Lesson Four: Our Relationships of Support & Accountability

Read:

- I Samuel 18:1-5
- Galatians 6:1-5

Introduction:

On my office wall hangs a terra cotta cross from Peru. Bearing the cross on their shoulders are fourteen peasants. It is a symbol of cooperation, unity and the sharing of one another's burdens.

Is there an object which symbolizes how others have helped you?

Notes:

'Jonathan loved David as his own soul.' David's popularity was rising not only with the king's son but also with his daughter, Michal (whom he later married with unfortunate results; see I Sam. 18:20-29; 19:8-17; 25:44; II Sam. 6:12-23), and with all the people. Jonathan's love ran deep into his soul, which the Hebrew word denotes the very essence of a person. Regardless of the specific details of their relationship, which is ambiguous in scripture, Jonathan and David's relationship is a model of fidelity.

His love was more than personal. It had political implications. Stripping himself of this robe and armor symbolized that he was surrendering his future claim to the throne to David. Later, Jonathan kept covenant with David by protecting him from his father Saul (I Sam. 19:1-7; 20:1-42).

Paul's advice to the Galatians is the 'how to' guide for maintaining this kind of covenant. He envisioned the church as a spiritual family that practices mutual support and accountability which in turn becomes a positive influence on all our relationships. Throughout the New Testament there are examples of this kind of advice (compare Gal. 5:1-5 with Matt. 18:15-18; Luke 17:3-4; Rom. 12; 2 Cor. 2:5-11; James 5:19-20).

Saturating and empowering our relationships is the Holy Spirit. 'You who have received the Spirit' (v.1) is not a reference to the spiritual elite but to every believer because the Spirit unites us in a covenant with each other and helps us live out our commitment to each other. Thus, 'the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David' through this divine connection.

This spiritual connection demands our active participation. When problems arise, relationships must be mended (the Greek word 'restore' in v. 1 is the same word used when referring to the fixing of nets). 'We bear one another's burdens' when are to be both proactive and gentle when addressing problems (v.2).

There appears to be a contradiction between v. 2 and v. 5 which says just the opposite: 'for each one should bear his or her own

load.' It is not so much a contradiction as it is a paradox. We must go the extra mile and help one another but at the same time we must avoid being judgmental.

We can only maintain this balance between acceptance and transformation through the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ who gives us the understanding and stamina for such relationships. Other teachers who were competing for the allegiance of the Galatian Christians by demanding that they practice circumcision in order to fulfill the Jewish laws. Paul knew that this advice only led to self-righteous and judgmental attitudes. Christ established a new ethic of love which freed them from narrow legalism. He enacted this love in himself and thus 'fulfills the law.' The freedom of his love ethic is available to us through his Spirit (see Gal. 2:20).

Questions:

1. As a child, what kinds of relationships did you see modeled by the adults around you? Does their example still have an impact on you and how you relate to others?

2. In what ways is David and Jonathan's relationship a role model for us?

3. Galatians says, 'Bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.' When have you 'carried the burdens' of another person? When did someone bear your burdens?

4. Galatians describes relationships of mutual accountability and support. What happens in a relationship when there is no accountability? No support?

5. What is the toughest relationship in your life right now?

6. How does your faith impact your relationships?

7. Are there any relationships in your life that need mending? What would it take? What would God have to do to make the mending possible?

8. Why does it seem more difficult for people today to make and sustain committed relationships?

Focus of the Week:

This week, show your appreciation to someone who has made a difference in your life. Be proactive and creative in expressing your thanks and affirmation.



Knot Tying Lesson Five: Our Covenant With Creation

Read:

- Genesis 9:8-17
- Romans 8:19-25

Introduction:

Our home is over a hundred years old and sits on a double lot which included a sun garden and reflection pool when it was built. Now, the sun garden is overgrown with tall trees and euonymus and the reflection pool is full of debris and branches. Little by little, I have been cutting and pruning and digging my way through it in the hope that I can create a space for meditation and wildlife habitation. Until then, my work is a time to pray and meditate.

Is there a place outside where you feel close to God?

Notes:

In Genesis, Noah was the new Adam who will be the father of humanity after the flood. He was given the same calling and receives the same promise of provisions from the earth (compare Genesis 1:28; 2:15 and Genesis 9:17, 20). The Creator pledged never again destroy the creation by water. Even in Revelation the hope is

not for the earth to come to an end but rather for the restoration and recreation of the 'new heaven and earth.' Salvation is seen as a restoration of creation, not an escape from it.

The covenant also came with the requirement to respect. Noah was forbidden to consume the blood of the meat he eats (v. 4). Blood was considered the life-force of all living creatures and God is requiring Noah to respect life (compare with Leviticus 17:10-14). God told Noah not to kill other humans (v. 6).

Like all covenants, this one was marked by a symbol: the rainbow. Unlike stone tablets or altars, the rainbow is a universal symbol because it covers all creation. Everyone is encompassed under it. Thus, we as the stewards of the covenant have an obligation to care for creation. Our care-taking is a participation in the salvific vision of restoration.

The Noahic covenant was the backstory to the vision of salvation in Romans eight. Paul made two assumptions in his letter. One, salvation is a restoration or fulfillment of the original creation. Too often we wrongly think of salvation as an escape or replacement from this world. Two, human salvation is inseparably linked with the salvation of the cosmos. Again, we have been misled to think of salvation as something God only does for the individual, a kind of eternal life insurance policy.

Our salvation is a part of a larger divine process of renewal. Paul described creation itself being in bondage as the byproduct of human sinfulness. We see this today in the way our greed and

violence has a devastating effect on the environment. The renewal of human beings is 'the first fruits of the Spirit' which will culminate in the renewal of every dimension of reality. Part and parcel of our salvation is our responsibility to care for creation. Just as the first human was charged with being a steward of the earth, we are commissioned to live out our salvation working for the protection of creation against the affects of evil.

Questions:

1. With whom does God make the covenant (9:9-10, 13)?
2. Too often we only think of God having a relationship with humankind. What does this covenant tell us about God's relationship with non-human creatures? What does it imply about our relationship with nature?

3. Noah's descendants include all human beings. What does this covenant tell us about God's relationship with non-Christians?
4. How is your spiritual growth connected with creation? What does it mean for you to be the 'first fruits' of God's larger vision of renewal?
5. How might this change your understanding of worship? Your lifestyle?


6. How do you celebrate God's creation?

7. What is hope? Based on Romans 8:18-25, how is it different from fantasy?

8. How big is your vision of hope?

Focus of the Week:

Bring your pet to the Blessing of the Animals on Saturday, October 5 at 10:00 a.m.



Knot Tying Lesson Six: Baptism, An Underwater Covenant

Read:

- Acts 10:44-48
- Liturgy for the Baptismal Covenant (see below)

Introduction:

‘Remember your baptism and be thankful,’ says the minister when we are confirmed or when we reaffirm our baptismal vows. If you are like me, it is impossible to remember your baptism because you were an infant. I may never be able to recall the ritual but I can never forget the people who witnessed it. I was baptized in the church where my mother and grandmother were baptized and where my family had fellowshiped since 1860. Present on the Sunday I was sprinkled were my future Sunday School and Vacation Bible School teachers, youth group sponsors and many other elders whose lives left an indelible mark on my faith. When I ‘remember my baptism’ I remember their faces and give God thanks for surrounding me with a covenant of grace.

Who was present at your baptism? What do you remember about them?

Notes:

Among other things, baptism represents our connection with and commitment to each other in the church. ‘Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ’s holy church,’ as the introduction to the ritual explains. Baptism reminds us of how God uses us, the people of God, as a channel of divine grace to nurture, direct and encourage the individual believer. The Bible often refers to being baptized by the water and the Spirit (e.g. Acts 1:5; 11:16’ John 3:5). We, the church, are called to be the water in which a person is bathed and refreshed in the Spirit.

The baptism of Cornelius’ people (Acts 10) illustrated the connecting nature of the sacrament. They were Gentiles who had received the gift of the Holy Spirit in the same way the Jewish believers had experienced on Pentecost in Acts 2. Up until this time, Gentile converts had been required to adopt the necessary Jewish customs and laws—in particular, circumcision—in order to become a follower of Jesus. Now, Peter could see that God ‘showed no partiality’ between Jews and Gentiles. Peter welcomed them as equals into the Church by offering them the sacrament as a sign of their unity in the Spirit. The tie that binds us together is made with water.

Whenever a person is baptized (or reaffirms their baptismal vows, as in the ritual of confirmation) we are not idle spectators. We actively participate by pledging our support for them. The liturgy is an opportunity for us to reaffirm our baptismal vows and

to receive the reassurance of the Spirit. This is why it is so important to do the full liturgy on Sunday morning.

The following is the baptismal liturgy (Baptismal Covenant I, hymnal pg. 33):

INTRODUCTION

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.

[If there is a confirmation or reaffirmation:]

Through confirmation, and through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy church.

RENUNCIATION OF SIN AND PROFESSION OF FAITH

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?

I do.

[If the candidate is not able to answer for themselves, parents or sponsors are asked:]

Will you nurture these children (persons) in Christ's holy Church, that by your teaching and example they may be guided to accept God's grace for themselves, to profess their faith openly, and to lead a Christian life?

I will.

[A deacon or the pastor addresses the congregation, and the congregation responds:]

Do you, as Christ's body, the Church, reaffirm both your rejection of sin and your commitment to Christ?

We do.

Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these persons now before you in your care?

With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their

service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.

[Traditionally, the Apostles' Creed is said at this time as an affirmation of faith representing what Christians around the world and over the centuries believe, symbolizing our baptism into this larger tradition and fellowship.]

THANKSGIVING OVER THE WATER

Eternal Father: When nothing existed but chaos, you swept across the dark waters and brought forth light. In the days of Noah you saved those on the ark through water. After the flood you set in the clouds a rainbow. When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt, you led them to freedom through the sea. Their children you brought through the Jordan to the land which you promised.

Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of God's mercy each day.

In the fullness of time you sent Jesus, nurtured in the water of a womb. He was baptized by John and anointed by your Spirit. He called his disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations.

Declare Christ's works to the nations, his glory among all the people.

Pour out your Holy Spirit, to bless this gift of water and those who receive it, to wash away their sin and clothe them in righteousness throughout their lives, that, dying and being raised with Christ, they may share in his final victory.

All praise to you, Eternal Father, through your Son Jesus Christ, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns forever. Amen.

BAPTISM WITH LAYING ON OF HANDS

[Name(s)], I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

The Holy Spirit work within you, that being born through water and the Spirit, you may be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Now it is our joy to welcome our new sisters and brothers in Christ.

Through baptism you are incorporated by the Holy Spirit into God's new creation and made to share in Christ's royal priesthood. We are all one in Christ Jesus. With joy and thanksgiving we welcome you as members of the family of Christ.

COMMENDATION AND WELCOME

[Those who have been baptized into Christ's holy Church are now welcomed into this congregation of The United Methodist Church:]

As members of Christ's universal church, will you be loyal to The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries?

I will.

As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service?

I will.

Members of the household of God, I commend these persons to your love and care. Do all in your power to increase their faith, confirm their hope, and perfect them in love.

We give thanks for all that God has already given you and we welcome you in Christian love. As members together with you in the body of Christ and in this congregation of The United Methodist Church, we renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the Church by our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness, that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.

[Pastor to those baptized, confirmed or received:]

The God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, establish you and strengthen you by the power of the Holy Spirit, that you may live in grace and peace.

Questions:


1. What 'evil, injustice and oppression' exists today and how are we to 'resist them'?
2. Are there any bad or sinful habits or attitudes that you need to get rid of in order to be a more effective channel of God's love to others?
3. Which area of your life do you need to learn how to 'put your whole trust in God's grace'?

4. How can we make the church more open 'to people of all ages, nations and races'?

5. In what ways can we surround new members 'with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.' How well do we do it?

Focus of the Week:

Read the Thanksgiving Over the Water. It recounts the story of God's saving love from the Exodus to Jesus. Think about your own story and how God has been at work in your life. Write your own prayer of thanksgiving recounting your personal history.



Knot Tying Lesson Seven: The Covenant of Generosity

Read:

- Haggai 1:1-11; 2:1-9
- 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Introduction:

Every Christmas my extended family has a white elephant gift exchange. The rule is that it cannot be worth more than \$5 and re-gifting a present is allowed. However, it can backfire. Two years ago, I brought a gift which was selected by my mother. The gift turned out to be the same gift she had given Ginny and me three years earlier!

How do you exchange gifts with friends or relatives at Christmas?

Notes:

In her book, *Living into Community*, Christine Pohl writes that ‘gift giving and receiving are closely connected to the deepening of relationships.’ This has always been true. When the Israelites returned from years in exile they began rebuilding their lives. Haggai recalls how their efforts were stymied by God because they did not contribute to the rebuilding of the Temple. It was more than

a fundraiser; it represented the rebuilding of their national life and their sense of unity. Paul writes a fundraising letter for the struggling church in Jerusalem asking their more affluent brothers and sisters in Corinth to help out. Saturated in the ask was the quality of their fellowship. We call money 'currency' for good reason. It is one of the currents through which our relationships are formed.

In other words, every gift has strings attached. They may be bad strings which stifle and control us. Or they may be good strings which deepen relationships that enable us to flourish.

Generosity is one of the essential ways we express the tie that binds us together in Christ. Our financial gifts are a pledge not only to God but also to one another. Our giving is an act of trust in others to put those gifts to good use. Our gifts are a tangible affirmation of another member's calling acknowledging that we are grateful for their service. Generosity is one way that God uses to bring us together in one common mission. The central question this week is "Why give?"

Questions:

1. Who taught you how to be generous?

2. When have you seen gift-giving misused?

3. How do you decide which organizations to contribute to?

4. What role does your faith play in your relationship with your finances (not just your giving but also your spending, earning, saving, etc.)?

5. What motivates your financial support for the church (check as many as apply; try to rate them):

- I feel a sense of obligation to support the ministries of the church
- I feel a sense of connection to my fellow church members
- I am grateful for what God and the church has done for me and others
- I feel like I am making a difference in the world when I give
- It makes me feel close to God

6. When has giving deepened a relationship for you? When has receiving a gift deepened a relationship for you?

7. Over the past 10 years, how have your financial giving patterns changed?

8. Over the next 10 years, what would you like your giving to look like?

Focus for the Week:

Review your contribution to the church this year and finalize your decision on what to pledge for 2014.