

The distortion of the parable that has given birth to the cult of the publican must be attributed in part, of course, to the sinfulness of man. But this catchall is not the full explanation. A part of the blame, and a large part at that, attaches to the Christian theologian himself and his own best intentions. In our eagerness to make God simple and religion easy to understand we have tried to say all that must be said of ultimate things in the redemptive assurances of the New Testament. We have lifted the truth made manifest in Jesus Christ out of the context of the whole Bible. And it has become in consequence a half-truth, with all the power of the half-truth to condemn what it is meant to serve.

When the word of God's undemanding forgiveness stands apart from the proclamation of God's full nature, that word can undermine man's sense of the meaning and value of his own life. It drains history of its purpose and turns the tumult of our days into "sound and fury, signifying nothing." If the Christian gospel is to be more than a counsel of pious despair, it must be preached and understood in the context of a creative and demanding doctrine of God's purpose for the world.

I hope that someday the penitent publican will read a *good* review of the book of Luke and discover for all our sakes that he must either move toward the altar in commitment or go down to his house, not justified, but condemned.

LEWIS B. SMEDES

The Power of Promises

Lewis B. Smedes — pastor, theologian, ethicist, professor — has written scholarly books, popular books, and some that are both scholarly and popular. Smedes's sermons belong in this last category. "The Power of Promises" is typical. Here Smedes analyzes a single concept with intellectual vigor, but also with the humane understanding of a pastoral care provider. Add passion and colloquial eloquence (in our culture, "what passes as a promise reads like a deal") and you have an offering that is both classic and contemporary — a new navy blazer of a sermon.

This sermon achieves multiple aims. While retrieving the biblical significance of a seemingly ordinary activity, Smedes also carries on cultural criticism, shores up the faithful, and highlights a much-neglected feature of the image of God.

The four introductory paragraphs climax with a sentence that at once summarizes the sermon and sticks in one's memory like a triumph.

Lewis B. Smedes, "Promises: The Power to Control the Future." Used with permission of the author.

The Power of Promises

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM."

Exodus 3:14

He said. . . "I will be with you."

Exodus 3:12

Somewhere today a woman is saying, "I would like to chuck this marriage and start over with somebody who knows how to love me; God knows the clod I married has not given me the love I need." But then she remembers a promise that she made and decides to stick with her marriage and try to make it work.

Somewhere today a father is saying to himself, "I want my impossible daughter to get out of the house and never come back; God knows she has driven me out of my mind." But he remembers a promise he made to her when she was born, and he decides to hang in with her in hurting love.

Somewhere today a minister is thinking, "I am going to give up my calling and find a line of work that pays off in a little more appreciation; God knows this congregation has given me third-degree burnout." But he remembers a promise he made to God when he was ordained, and he decides to renew his spirit and stick with his vocation.

Yes, somewhere people still make and still keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then *you are like God*.

What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

When a person makes a promise, she stakes a claim on her personal freedom and power.

When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future. When I make a promise to you, I am acting on the assumption that my future is not locked on some bionic beam; I am not totally bound to the fateful combination of x's and y's in my genetic code. When I make a promise I refuse to surrender my relationships with people I love to the wayward drives of my subconscious. When I make a promise I act in freedom. I am not a cigar butt thrown out into the cosmos. I am not a hunk of clay waiting to be shaped by my culture. I am free to create a future of my own.

And an identity of my own. I create my identity as this woman's husband and that child's father and that man's friend. Our culture tries to tell us we can be real selves only if we claim our right to self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. A free self knows he becomes a genuine self by making commitments to other people — promises that he intends to keep even when keeping them exacts a price.

Some people ask, "Who am I?" and expect an answer to come from their feelings. Some people ask, "Who am I?" and expect the answer to come from their accomplishments. Other people ask, "Who am I?" and expect the answer to come from what other people think about them. A person who dares to make and keep promises discovers who she is by the promises she has made and kept to other people.

What you feel is not what you are. Feelings are flickering flames that fade with every fitful breeze. What you desire is not what you are. Desires rise and fall and change so fast that they can

only tell you what you want at any trembling moment; knowing what you want is not the same as knowing what you are.

It is the power of promise-making that creates a lasting and genuine identity for us. Listen to the Jewish philosopher, Hannah Arendt: "Without being bound to the fulfillment of our promises we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of every person's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities."

To wander in the darkness of our lonely hearts — this is the fate of a person who does not know who he is. To be caught in our own contradictions — this is the sadness of a person who cannot find her identity.

Do you remember *A Man for All Seasons*, that brilliant play about Sir Thomas More? His daughter Meg begged him to save his skin by going back on a promise that he had made. His answer tells us how dangerous it is to make light of a promise, no matter how risky it is to keep it: "Ah, Meg, when a man takes an oath he holds his own self in his hands, like water, and when he opens his hands he need not hope to find himself again."

We are our promises, and we lose hold of ourselves when we take no pains to keep them.

There is a paradox here. The freedom we demonstrate in making commitments is the freedom to limit our freedom. When you make a promise you limit your freedom so that you can be there with the person who trusts you to keep your promise. "The person who makes a vow," said Chesterton, "makes an appointment with himself at some distant time and place and he gives up his freedom in order to keep the appointment." You freely tie yourself down so that other persons can be free to trust that you will keep your promise to them.

On this sort of trust, the whole human family depends.

The future of the human race hangs on a promise. Is there a happy ending to the human romance? It depends completely on a word spoken, a promise made. One thing can assure us that the story of mankind will not end in global disaster. One thing can assure us that this shining globe will not turn into a global garbage

heap. One thing gives us hope that one day the world will finally work right for everyone and that the human family will discover peace and love and justice and freedom together. That one thing is a promise made and a promise kept.

It began, you remember, when a common Chaldean named Abraham burned his bridges and gambled his destiny on the reliability of a promise he heard from a stranger in the wilderness.

Stopped in his tracks by a flaming clump of chaparral that did not want to stop burning, Moses came to attention at the voice of an invisible, ineffable Someone calling him to lead his neglected people out of slavery.

Moses was skeptical. "What is your name?" he asked the invisible Stranger. "The people will need some identification." The name came from behind the flame; it came in a word of four cryptic Hebrew consonants that have defied confident translation. "I am who I am," the metaphysically bent scholars have rendered it. But Moses was not a metaphysician. He was a level-headed Hebrew who knew that everything depended on whether this Stranger God could be trusted.

What Moses needed to know was whether he could depend on the Stranger. And what the Stranger God wanted to tell Moses was that he was a God who made promises and kept the promises he made. So the most likely translation of his name goes something like this: "I Am the One Who Will Be There With You." This is God's identity, this is who and what God is: a promise-maker and a promise-keeper.

No one on earth at that moment could have predicted the rises and falls of the people who heard and believed the promise. Moses led them out of Egypt, but once in the land of promise, they acted like a people with a national death wish.

One thing kept them going — the promise of the Stranger in the wilderness, the "One who will be there with you." And one day, in a most unpromising time, when it seemed as if the Stranger had surely forgotten who he was and what he promised, a man came out of Judea saying strange and wonderful things about being Immanuel. In the end he let his blood flow over God's good earth, and with that shedding of blood sealed again the ancient promise: "I am the One who will be there with you."

Will he be? This is the peg on which the future hangs. What will come of it all in the end? A global garbage heap? Or a new earth that finally works right?

Early followers of the Risen One asked the same question in their fashion: "Whatever happened to the promise? What have we got to look forward to?"

Their question is our question: What will it all come to? And where can we get a clear answer?

The data from our natural environment is ambiguous. The evidence from history is discouraging. In the first volume of his great work on ethics, James Gustafson shares his melancholy judgment that nothing in natural history can assure us that nature is basically friendly to the human species. And nothing in the human story gives us a hint that the human species is wise and good enough to make the world work right. There is very little to convince us that the odds of the cosmic game are tilted in our favor.

But then those early Christians did not put their question about the future to natural scientists and historians. They put their question to a fisherman. A man called Peter. And this was the answer they got: "According to his promise, we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth where everything will work right" (2 Pet. 3:13). There it is again: a promise, the promise of the One whose name is "I will be there with you."

Will there be a happy ending? It depends on a promise. Everything hangs on a promise made and a promise kept.

And what comes of our own communities, too, is settled by the power of our own all-too-human promises. Our friendships. Our marriages. Our families. Our neighborhoods. These are the communities that matter to us now. And every community we live in is born and bred by promises made and promises kept.

What else keeps a marriage together? When two people get married, they take on two new identities. Each of them says to the other what God said to Moses: "I am the one who will be there for you."

This sort of promise is countercultural these days. We have, in our culture, decided to make contracts instead of promises. What passes as a promise reads like a deal: "I will be there for you as

long as you provide me with all the satisfaction I have coming." This is not a promise; it is a contract. The difference is this: we keep promises even when we are not getting what we have coming. The power of a promise is — in Stanley Hauerwas's words — the power to stick with what we are stuck with.

Nobody knows what she is getting into when she gets married. Nobody knows for sure what sort of person she will become. A man or woman can become several different persons before a marriage is finished. My own wife has slept with at least six different men since she married me, and each of them has been me. But in one most important sense, we can stay the same person we were when we first got married: the person who makes and keeps the promise is always "the one who will be there" with the other.

Take the family for another instance. What is a family but a community of promises made and promises kept — no matter what? A family is not just two or more people related by blood who happen to live under one roof. A family is not a management device by which two adults shuffle children around to the various experts who do the real rearing. A family is a community of people who dare to make a promise and care enough to keep it — no matter what. A real parent has the same name as God does: "the one who will be there with you."

A family is held together by promises: where promises fail, families fail. The rebirth of the family can begin only in the rebirth of promise keeping.

When you get right down to it, everything we do together, from a nation conceived and born in liberty to a family reunion, from a successful political campaign to a winning baseball season, from a United Nations Organization to a church picnic — everything hangs on the thin thread of promises made and promises kept.

Toward the end of his three volumes on the history of the French Revolution, Thomas Carlyle concluded that the revolution failed, not because of corruption in high places, but because ordinary people in their ordinary places neglected to keep their promises.

If we do not keep our promises, what once was a human

community turns into a combat zone of competitive self-maximizers. We are at sea, loose-jointed, uncertain, leery of each other, untrusting. Nobody can trust her neighbors. And without trust, no law, no police force, no legal contracts can keep a community human. The fact is that we are a people who can join together in a permanently free society only if we are a people who can keep promises together.

Let me conclude by repeating what I have been trying to say here.

Our human destiny hangs totally on whether God will retain his identity as the One who will be there with us.

You and I can create an identity for ourselves in the promises we keep to each other.

You and I will experience genuine human community only if we keep our promises to each other.

In short, life begins and ends with those who dare to make a promise and care enough to keep the promise they make.

THE FORMS AND DYNAMICS OF THE SERMON

Suppose a preacher has a text, a theme, and a worthy reason for bringing them to a congregation. How shall the preacher deliver these goods? After all, as Fred Craddock says in *Preaching*, "that the preacher has a message does not mean that the listeners will get the message."

Assuming, with Craddock, that all good sermons hold a tight focus, tap Christian tradition, invite listeners into the world of the sermon so that they feel both curious and at home in it, and establish intimacy between preacher and hearers — assuming that all effective sermons offer some blend of these qualities, how do they do it?

The sermons that follow have been chosen especially for their technique along these lines: for the way they live and move and shape themselves; for the way they lure listeners into them; in short, for the form and dynamics they employ in order to achieve their aim. Beginning with a well-cut three-point sermon of Ernest Campbell, this section includes sermons that splay out from a central image, or adopt a novel point of view, or deliberately move in "waves." Some use language uncommonly well. One of them is a prayer. All show their author's awareness that where the use of sermon forms and dynamics is concerned, the idea is not merely to deliver the freight, but also to move listeners to sign for it.