**22nd Pentecost. Jeremiah 31:27-34, Luke 18:1-8**

*The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah … It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt-- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD….I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

Sometime around 1961 I walked away from the church. The reasons aren’t very interesting, but I do remember going on a youth retreat around that time, where the minister said, “If you feel you have to go away from the church, it’s OK. God can wait 25 years.” And about 25 years later I came back. I came home to the church because I had discovered I needed a covenant written on my heart.

It’s not like I had no religion during those years. I had Christian values, of course. And I participated in a steady stream of weddings, bar mitzvahs, and Passover seders with all of our Jewish friends in New York City. And so a learned a lot about the Holocaust, and about the righteous gentiles, the brave ones who offered their lives and often gave their lives to save Jews. And I began to worry about whether I would ever live into those Christian values if, God forbid, I was put to that test. And I came to understand that if I were to fail that test, my life would be worthless. And I finally decided that, just maybe, I might have a chance if I were part of a faith community.

*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

In those days I wasn’t even sure what I believed, but I began giving money to my church right away, because I understood that giving money was part of the behavior of a member of a faith community. And it wasn’t just a ritual five dollar bill in the plate. I understood that the money was to represent ME. And I’m more than five bucks. In other words, what I learned in those early days was that before I would be able to walk the *talk,* I was going to have to walk the *walk.*

I learned that a covenant on my heart means that what I do is who I am. A covenant written on your heart is not a *quid pro quo—*If you do this I’ll do that. It’s not like the old covenant between God and the Israelites, based on rewards and punishments. A covenant written on my heart is not conditional on whether or not I approve of the Bishop, or like the language in the liturgy. I began giving to my church because giving had become who I was.

But that’s not all I learned. I learned that giving isn’t enough to seal a covenant on the heart. I came to understand that *pledging* to give money adds the element of promise. And promise is part of covenant. A promise is mutual—it’s something you make *with* somebody, not just with yourself. A promise involves others—just like marriage is a declaration to one’s community. So if giving is who I am, pledging is a covenant with you about who I *will be*.

What this boils down to is that pledging money to your faith community, and keeping that pledge is a spiritual practice—an act of faith. In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus teaches us to pray always and not to lose heart. That’s another sort of act of faith. The widow in the parable keeps appealing to the judge because she believes she will receive justice in the face of all evidence to the contrary. Keeping faith is a spiritual practice—something you just do, because in doing it you become who you are.