

Well, the papers and the networks lately have been filled with bad news—or more specifically, bad *financial* news. Have you been following the story about AIG, the insurance giant which is “too big to fail”? This is not news about the people in the rank and file, who just do their jobs honestly, day in and day out. This is the scandal at the top, about executives who were given huge bonuses, out of government bail-out money, *millions of dollars* of bonuses.

And it is reported that this was unavoidable, because the bonuses were in their contract. Contracts are binding, we are told. To get out of a contract would take a team of high-priced lawyers who will search for the wiggle room, the loop-holes or the “buy-out.” And apparently, until the President of the United States said on TV that there was nothing illegal about these scandalous contracts and bonuses, nobody else was very motivated to stop them. Now it may be too late.

Contracts, of course, are just elaborately-written agreements between two parties. They usually state the terms clearly, including who gets what benefits from the agreement, who promises to perform what duties. And the terms are always spelled out as to what constitutes a breach of contract and what happens if one or the other party breaks the contract.

Probably all of us have signed contracts, or entered some binding agreements. If you've ever bought a house, you faced mountains of paperwork. If you rent, chances are you signed a rental agreement with the terms spelled out. If you've bought a car, you put your signature to a bunch of “boiler plate” language that you didn't read carefully, because you just longed for the keys to the car. If you've even parked in a pay lot, when they hand you a stub for your \$5 bucks, *you have entered a contract*. The tiny lettering spells out the terms and limited liability which the parking lot or valet company, is accepting.

In the First Reading today, we have a fascinating scene, described by the prophet Jeremiah, in which a *broken contract* has to be re-negotiated. A *covenant* is an agreement, a contract. And, as Jeremiah tells the people, you *had* a covenant, a contract, with the Lord. It was a covenant in which the people of Israel promised to be *obedient* to God's law, and God promised to bless the people, to free them from their slavery in Egypt, and to give them a home in the Promised Land.

+

But they *breached* that contract, they *broke* that covenant through constant disobedience. The Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, is the long, long story, of a *series* of covenants which God offered to the people of Israel, *and* the tortured story of their disobedience, especially in wandering off into idolatry and faith in non-existence idols (those “other gods” mentioned in the Ten Commandments); and the *emotionally-wrenching* story of Israel's decline and fall. This long story is not just the religious story. It is the story of a *nation* which grew and prospered, and then failed and almost *disappeared* when other world powers overran them. The Old Testament tells the story of how these people wrestled with why such a sad state had come upon them. As their leaders *in exile* sat hopeless in what amounted to an internment camp, a prison camp in a foreign land, the prophet Jeremiah explained it *all* to them. And he did it *much more bluntly* than Barack Obama telling us what's wrong with our economy.

“Thus says the Lord,” is Jeremiah's blunt language to the children of Israel. “I took them by the hand to bring them out of Egypt”—one of the terms of the contract, the enumeration of the benefits the Lord God was offering this people—“a covenant which they *broke*, [al]though I was their husband, says the Lord.”

Oh, wait a minute! So Jeremiah is saying that the *agreement*, the contract which Israel *had* with the Lord was like a *marriage contract*. Israel was united with the Lord, and became *unfaithful*. This changes everything, doesn't it?

Two days ago I was honored to preside at the wedding of one of the daughters of this congregation, Jacqueline Rockwell, who was given in marriage by her father and mother Gerald and Georgina, to Benjamin Juarez. It was a wonderful affair. The food and flowers and songs and dancing were wonderful. And *of course* the bride was beautiful and the groom was handsome.

Right *now*, I am thinking *not* about the sentimentality of the marriage ceremony and party afterward. I am thinking about the *contract*. I made it very clear, in pre-marital counseling, and in the ceremony itself, that marriage is based on the *consent* of two parties. If there is no consent, there is no marriage. And so the formal words were spoken: “Do you take this man, or this woman, to be your husband,

or wife, from this day *forward*, for better or *worse*, in sickness and in health, as long as life shall last?" In other words, are you entering into this agreement freely and without coercion? Are you ready to accept both the obligations and the benefits of married life?

And *of course*, both Benjamin and Jacqueline, gladly said over and over, "I do. I do. I do." And, afterward, I took them aside with their two *witnesses*, and we filled out the marriage license. Their best friends put their signatures on the paper to attest that they saw Ben and Jackie publicly accept the terms of the marriage contract.

But a marriage contract is like no other, because *love* is involved. There are not merely some nice benefits and guarantees for performance of the contract. Two *hearts* are involved, woven together, in a way that two *business* partners would never feel. And *this* is the contract, says Jeremiah the prophet, which the children of Israel had *broken*. They had said, throughout their history, "we *love* the Lord," and the Lord God said to them, "I *loved* you." But the people of Israel were *not* faithful, and their love wandered. Their national life soured; it crashed and burned.

This scene, however, is *not* divorce court. You know what happens when two lovers or two spouses breach their agreement in love. It's usually "over." Because *love* and trust are involved, it is not easy to forgive and to pick up and start again. *One* heart has been broken when the *other* is faithless.

But I said a minute ago that this is a scene in which a *broken contract was being re-negotiated*. God, who is the broken-hearted one, unilaterally offers another covenant, a different covenant than the previous one which was broken. Now Jeremiah, sitting in prison camp, in exile, with the leaders of this faithless people, invites them to *imagine* something they have not yet seen or experienced. "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. . . ."

This is a *new* day, the prophet foresees. *New* terms and stipulations. *New* benefits, *new* bonuses, if you will! And *what* is *different*? we might ask. Why should *we* notice? Why should we *care*; why *even* read this old stuff? . . . The prophet was predicting a future event. Why *we* should take notice and pay attention to this stuff is because *he predicted our future*.

Jeremiah's is a word which *Christians claim*.

Looking back, we claim the covenant that was actually made, *long* after Jeremiah's time, when Jesus took bread on the night when he was betrayed, and blessed it and broke it and gave it to his disciples *as a sign of the terms of this contract*: "This bread is my body, this cup is a *new covenant* in my blood, shed for you and for all people."

Jesus offered *himself* to seal this contract. The terms included his cross; the "valuable consideration" or payment is his body and blood, given for us. And the benefits are forgiveness and blessing and life.

Jeremiah saw other aspects of this new agreement, this new contract between the Lord God and human beings. We know now that it wasn't offered *just* to the Jewish people *for their benefit*, but *through* the Jewish people *for the benefit of all* human beings.

And it isn't an external thing now, with binding terms and conditions that we must constantly check and consult to see if we're keeping our end of the agreement, in order to avoid a breach of contract. *This time*, says Jeremiah, "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 other words, this covenant will be *very* personal, *interior*; *not* legalistic, but *deeply spiritual*.

I'm thinking again of the happy newly-weds. While they gave their public consent to the terms of the marriage contract, promising to stick with one another through thick and thin, in sickness or health, poverty or plenty, *they will not need* to constantly check the license or the boiler plate language of the marriage contract. They will *just know*. With God's help, the covenant is *written in their hearts*. With God's blessing, they will love, honor and cherish one another *without threats* or penalties for non-compliance or failure to carry out the terms of the agreement.

This is our faith, my friends, the faith to which we are summoned in this season. We are called to renew our commitment to the Lord God, for the sake of Jesus' Cross, and Jesus' blood. We are called to remember God's great love for us, a relationship filled with promises and hopefulness and love and life. We are called to a new relationship with the Lord God, one that was sealed with Christ's blood, but written on our hearts. And one that not only offers us benefits and bonuses, but one that can *heal* broken hearts everywhere, and change the world forever. Amen.

