

Renewing Our Covenant

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

January 1, 2017

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Jeremiah 31:31–34 (CEB)

³¹The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. ³²It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the LORD. I will put my Instructions within them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the LORD!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

Luke 22:15–20 (CEB)

¹⁵He said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶I tell you, I won't eat it until it is fulfilled in God's kingdom." ¹⁷After taking a cup and giving thanks, he said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. ¹⁸I tell you that from now on I won't drink from the fruit of the vine until God's kingdom has come." ¹⁹After taking the bread and giving thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁰In the same way, he took the cup after the meal and said, "This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you.

We begin a New Year today and there is no better time to reaffirm our commitment to be genuine disciples of Jesus, loving God and neighbor every day and in every way.

It is a new year. The time we make resolutions about changes we will make in our lives. Sometimes the resolutions are trivial and doomed to failure from the start. Others are more serious and can even effect real change. This New Year, perhaps we should set aside the typical resolutions about weight loss, time management, and the rest. Let us, instead, affirm our commitment to our Lord and Savior by way of a covenant that will mark this New Year. John Wesley led his congregations in such a covenant renewal annually, but before we get to Wesley we will revisit the biblical covenants between God and his people.

Covenant

God's people have always lived in a covenant relationship with our Maker. Sometimes these biblical covenants are really pledges that God makes, such as the pledge to Noah never to flood the earth again. God's covenant with Abraham is also a promise by God to give Abraham a land, countless descendants, and that all the earth would be blessed through him. God asks very little of Abraham. There is no Law, no Ten Commandments, no tabernacle.

However, centuries later, at Mt. Sinai, God made a covenant with his chosen people after saving them from slavery in Egypt. The Ten Commandments, written on stone tablets, lay at the heart of this covenant. Though the Israelites cherished God's law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unable to live as God had taught them. They proved unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

Nonetheless, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God's people would no longer even have to teach other about God, for they would all know God.

God would forgive their wickedness and not even remember their sin. This would be God's new covenant with his people.

The Last Supper and the New Covenant

Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus' actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God's kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God's kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah's judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem¹ for festival, Jesus and his disciple had stayed in Bethany, a "suburb." Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. Here, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the "bread of affliction,"² (Deut 16:3). Now, Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. But now, Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the "mediator of a better covenant, enacted through better promises" (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus' own blood. Is it any wonder that early Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord's Supper? (See 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 for the tradition about the Lord's Supper passed on to Paul. Paul's letter was written before any of the Gospels.)

Written on our hearts

Mack Stokes, a retired Methodist Bishop, wrote that Communion "awakens a holy memory of what Jesus has done for us and for the whole world . . . this sacrament is a celebration of God's redeeming love and empowering grace."³ We are people of the new covenant. God has put within us a new heart and a new Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26). We may not always feel this way or act like it, but we are not alone. God is with us – comforting, guiding, strengthening, and loving.

And so to John Wesley

John Wesley adopted the practice of leading congregations in an annual Covenant Service, which came to be most often held on New Years Eve. This "Covenant Renewal Service" is still in the UMC Book of Worship in much the same form as used in 1780. I invite you to read through it. You can find it on-line. You'll discover that the language is . . . stout. It is a serious covenant built upon sincere confession and genuine commitment. The covenant is grounded upon giving ourselves to God completely, holding nothing back. It is about trusting obedience of Christ in all things. The UMC cautions that the covenant is such "hearty fare" that congregations must be prepared for it, lest it become empty words.

¹ The population of Jerusalem was about 60,000 in Jesus' day, but could swell to nearly 200,000 during major festivals.

² God instructed the Israelites to use unleavened bread at Passover to remind them of their hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread is bread made without yeast. It takes time for yeast to do its magic, making the bread rise.

³ Mack B. Stokes, *Major United Methodist Beliefs*, Abingdon Press.

Here is a brief excerpt from the service that lays out the heart of the covenant to which Wesley called his congregations:

First, set apart some time, more than once,
to be spent alone before the Lord;
in seeking earnestly God's special assistance
and gracious acceptance of you;
in carefully thinking through all the conditions of the covenant;
in searching your hearts
whether you have already freely given your life to Christ.
Consider what your sins are.
Consider the laws of Christ, how holy, strict, and spiritual they are,
and whether you, after having carefully considered them,
are willing to choose them all.
Be sure you are clear in these matters, see that you do not lie to God.

Second, be serious and in a spirit of holy awe and reverence.

Third, claim God's covenant,
rely upon God's promise of giving grace and strength,
so you can keep your promise.
Trust not your own strength and power.

Fourth, resolve to be faithful.
You have given to the Lord your hearts,
you have opened your mouths to the Lord,
and you have dedicated yourself to God.
With God's power, never go back.

For Wesley, true faith is expressed in good works. We can't divorce faith from ethics. How we live expresses how well we know God. Whether or not we are obedient tests our claim to have faith in Jesus Christ. Faithful obedience is not merely something to strive for, but to achieve.

Stout words. Stouter ideas. Countless times I've been asked whether what we do really matters in the end. Why be "good" if it is all about grace? It is all about grace and that is precisely why we are called to be good and expected to actually deliver. Trusting obedience can be the only response to a gracious and loving God, to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.

Obedient as to what? As Jesus himself said and enacted countless times, God's instructions are simple: love God and love one another. Others ought to see this in us. They ought to see "love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). Do we feed and clothe and care? How? When?

For me, it has always come down to this. I claim to trust Jesus Christ and, as a consequence, that I live in a right relationship with God, that God's Spirit lives and works in and with and through me. I ought to have something to show for all this. Others should see it.

I live in a covenant relationship with God. God has shown me unimaginable love and I am to live out that love in all my relationships, lifetime and momentary, casual and formal, workplace and home. For in this, as John the Apostle writes, "the love of God has reached perfection."⁴

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. There are times when Jeremiah's promise of a new heart and Ezekiel's promise of a new spirit seem very distant and unreal. In truth, we do not always live in right

⁴ There is beauty in the ambiguity here. Does "the love of God" refer to God's love for us or our love for God. Which has reached perfection (meaning -- to bring to completion; to reach its full measure; to lack nothing)? Perhaps both?

relationship with God and with others. Just as God's kingdom has yet to be fully realized, so our own hearts are still works-in-progress. Still, we can be confident that the Holy Spirit works in us to help us grow and mature as the people of the new covenant. Describe times in your life when you have felt particularly frustrated in your Christian walk. Describe times when you've felt particularly close to God, when you've felt God's power working in your life. What are some concrete ways we can turn our hearts more fully to God?

2. William Willimon writes, "The Wesleyan Revival was, in great part, a sacramental revival, and Methodist converts had an intense desire to demonstrate their new relationship with God by frequent and committed participation in the Lord's Supper." Yet, Methodists lost much of this commitment and desire. Mack Stokes writes, "United Methodists have not always appreciated the importance of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. In this we have often failed to recognize our identity as a historic community of faith in the line of Christ and the apostles." What role do you think the Lord's Supper plays in our life at St. Andrew? In your own life?
3. The old hymn, "Trust and Obey," gets it right. That is exactly our calling and this is exactly the covenant we have made with God and which we continually need to renew. How do we get out of the trap of thinking that leading an obedient life somehow sets aside God's grace? In other words, how can we strive to be obedient without thinking that we are earning our salvation? You might think about the Exodus. Which came first, the saving of the Hebrew slaves or the giving of the Law?

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Exodus 11:9 – 12:51 God's plague passes over the first-born of Israel; God institutes a festival of remembrance – to remember the Passover.

Tuesday, Ezekiel 36:22-37:14 God promises to restore his people, putting his Spirit in them and giving them new hearts

Wednesday, Matthew 26:17-30 Matthew's account of the Last Supper.

Thursday, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Paul instructs the church in Corinth about the Lord's Supper

Friday, Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:11-22 The author of Hebrews interprets the new covenant and the use of Jesus' own blood. Note that Jeremiah is quoted at length!

Saturday, 1 John 1:5-2:6 May we truly walk in the light in 2017!

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Genesis

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the Gospel of Luke

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

New series starting Jan 8: *Simply Good News: Reading the gospels with N. T. Wright*

This class will not meet on January 1.