

Covenant

Exodus 24:3-8 & Jeremiah 31:31-34

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Well we're in our third week of our summer sermon series where Bill and I are lifting up some key theological thoughts of Christianity. As Bill mentioned before, it's an ambitious challenge we're taking upon ourselves this summer, since some of these topics take entire semesters of seminary, or at least a week or two, and we're trying to boil them down to a 15-minute sermon. Now my preaching professor was adamant about the fact that sermons are not monologue, they're dialogue. She encouraged the understanding that sermons should either start or continue a conversation. To some degree, that takes the pressure off of Bill and me, because we don't have to stuff everything into our sermons. We hope that our sermons will stimulate some thoughtful discussion. That's one reason why we decided to open up the discussion boards on our website.

Yes, it's time for me to plug the new feature on our website. On our home page is a link that will allow you, with just a couple of mouse clicks, to jot a response to our sermon. Maybe it's a question the sermon left you with. Maybe it's your chance to share a different point of view. The discussion boards are meant to inspire lively conversation and to give and take opinions. Now we know that this kind of thing isn't for everyone. But we put it out there for those who might find it interesting and/or helpful. Ok – plug's over.

Over the last two weeks, we've looked at God and creation, and sin and free will. Today we're talking about covenant. What is a covenant? In general, a covenant is an agreement made between two or more parties. Covenants are not necessarily religious. There are covenants made in legal and financial documents. But when we speak of covenant in the church, what we're really talking about are agreements made between people and God.

The idea of covenant is laced throughout scripture. In fact, several of the resources I reviewed this week said that the entire Bible could be considered essentially a story of covenant. The foundational understandings of covenant are found in the old testament. God made a covenant with Noah that there would never again be another flood that would cover the entire earth. God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah that they would be the parents of many nations, that their children would be as countless as the stars or the grains of sand. God made a covenant with Moses to bless and protect the Israelites. Each of these covenants had a sign to remind God and the people of the covenant. For Noah, the sign of the covenant was the rainbow in the sky. For Abraham, it was circumcision. For Moses, it was the ten commandments that were placed in the ark of the covenant that was later found by Indiana Jones and stored in Area 51, never to be seen again, until the Russians come looking for the alien remains that are also stored there. Ok, maybe I'm confusing that last part with the movies.

We experience covenants in our own lives. Most of us have entered into the covenant of baptism, and we use water as a sign of that covenant. Those who enter into the covenant of marriage use their rings as a sign of the covenant. One of my favorite things about performing marriage ceremonies is the privilege I have of reminding the couple that their marriage covenant is not just between the two of them, but that God is an equal party to that covenant. And, as Ecclesiastes reminds us, “A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”¹

But let’s get back to the covenants in the old testament. They were very serious matters. Often, the covenant was sealed with blood. The term often used when describing the establishment of a covenant was to “cut” the covenant. The word “cut” was quite literal. In biblical times, a person making a covenant would often cut an animal in half, lay the two parts down, and walk in between the parts of the animal, saying, “If I should break the covenant I just made, may the same thing that happened to this animal happen to me.” You see, cutting a covenant was not necessarily a clean and tidy arrangement people made.

In the Exodus passage read this morning, we heard about Moses consecrating the covenant of the law with burnt offerings, sacrificed oxen, and blood splattered on those gathered round him, saying, “See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you.”²

Now if you’re like me, you’re saying to yourself, “Boy, I’m sure glad that covenants aren’t made in the same way as they once were!” And maybe there’s a question about that. Why don’t we do it that way any more? This brings us to the Jeremiah reading we had today.

You see, the covenant of the law was a covenant that required perfect behavior by God’s people. The story of the old testament overall is the story of the people of God continually cycling through times of living within the covenant, then breaking the covenant, then coming back to God and living within the covenant again. The cycle continued for generations upon generations.

Jeremiah tells us, “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 ... a covenant that they broke ... But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, 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 ... I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”³ This is the new covenant that we live under. Some have called it the covenant of grace. The law is no longer something outside of us that we have to try to follow. No, the law is written on our hearts, and God promises to remember our sin no more.

¹ Ecclesiastes 4:12 (NIV)

² Exodus 24:8 (NRSV)

³ Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NRSV)

One writer summarized John Wesley's understanding of this by saying "Perfect obedience was made the condition of the first covenant; earnest, hearty obedience of the second."⁴

Jesus brings us this new covenant. According to the writers of the gospels, Jesus only used the word covenant once. He said it during the last supper. Remember that the last supper was the disciples celebration of the Passover meal. It was a time when the Israelites remembered God's saving actions. Jesus takes the cup of wine of the Passover meal and, remembering Jeremiah's words about a new covenant, says, "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."⁵ Through his death on the cross, Jesus ended the need for bloodshed to establish a covenant. Jesus establishes the new covenant Jeremiah promised. A covenant that we live in today. A covenant that we remember by participating in holy communion.

Each week in our sermon series we are providing the statements that our denomination has made regarding the topics. For today's topic, there is no specific denominational statement like we've had the past two weeks. This does not mean that covenants are not an important part of our denominational heritage. No, I might even go as far as to say that covenants were so integral to the Methodist way of living one's faith that there was no need to make a specific statement about them. It was simply understood by everyone because it was a part of their day-to-day practice of faith.

For example, in the time of Wesley, Methodists were all part of small groups called "bands." The members of these small groups made a covenant with God and with one another regarding the ways they would relate to one another, and how they would help one another keep the faith.

On a larger scale, Wesley began holding an annual "Covenant Renewal Service." This service was usually held on the first Sunday in January, and it gave Methodists the opportunity to remember the covenant God had made with them and to renew their covenant with God. We didn't do it this year, but I believe it's not uncommon for us here at Maple Grove to have some form of Wesley's covenant renewal service at the beginning of the year.

You see, Wesley understood that while God keeps covenants eternally, we humans are in need of regular reminders of the covenants we make. And so he developed the service that you see in your bulletin. The first time he tried it out, 1800 Methodists stood up in agreement of it. He was sure that he had come upon another useful instrument of God's grace, saying, "Such a night I scarce ever saw before. Surely the fruit of it shall remain for ever."⁶

⁴ Watson, David Lowes. *The Early Methodist Class Meeting*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992. p. 44.

⁵ Matthew 26:28 (NKJV)

⁶ Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley and the people called Methodists*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995. P. 198.

As you can see, the service is rather lengthy. We don't have the time this morning to go through the full service, so I'll let you read it in detail later today or this week. As a side note, if there is enough interest in doing a Wesleyan Covenant Renewal service at some point, using the full liturgy, Bill and I are on board. Just let us know that you'd like that.

So even if we can't get into detail about the service, I'd at least like to hit some of the high points. The first thing you'll notice about the service is the significant emphasis placed on submission to God. The first bold-faced statement is "Let me be your servant, under your command. I will no longer be my own. I will give up myself to your will in all things." This addresses what I think is the primary condition that separates us from God: our selfishness, self-reliance, self-interest, and self-satisfaction. It's the condition that results when we think we don't need God, when we think that we can take care of everything on our own, when we think we have everything necessary to take care of our own needs, thank you very much, when we think the whole world revolves around ourselves. Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service gives us a healthy reminder that it's not all about us, but that when we put the interests of God ahead of our own, we will find the fullness of life we are looking for.

The other thing I want to mention about the service is the guidance Wesley gives for how to establish and keep our covenant with God. He says, "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 as you make or renew your covenant.

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.

And last, be then prepared to renew your covenant with the Lord. Fall down on your knees, lift your hands toward heaven, open your hearts to the Lord.

Wesley knew the importance of covenants, and he knew humanity's tendency to break them. So he knew the importance of providing opportunities for people to renew our covenant with God. This morning, in place of going through Wesley's entire Covenant Renewal Service, let us use Wesley's guidance as we remember and renew our covenant with God through the gift of holy communion.

WESLEY'S COVENANT SERVICE

Taken from *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1992. Pp. 291-294.

INVITATION

Commit yourselves to Christ as his servants. Give yourselves to him, that you may belong to him. Christ has many services to be done. Some are more easy and honorable; others are more difficult and disgraceful. Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests, others are contrary to both. In some we may please Christ and please ourselves. But then there are other works where we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. It is necessary, therefore, that we consider what it means to be a servant of Christ. Let us, therefore, go to Christ, and pray:

Let me be your servant, under your command. I will no longer be my own. I will give up myself to your will in all things.

Be satisfied that Christ shall give you your place and work.

Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands: put me to doing, put me to suffering, let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and with a willing heart give it all to your pleasure and disposal.

Christ will be the Savior of none but his servants. He is the source of all salvation to those who obey. Christ will have no servants except by consent; Christ will not accept anything except full consent to all that he requires. Christ will be all in all, or he will be nothing. Confirm this by a holy covenant. To make this covenant a reality in your life, listen to these admonitions:

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.

And last, be then prepared to renew your covenant with the Lord. Fall down on your knees, lift your hands toward heaven, open your hearts to the Lord, as we pray:

COVENANT PRAYER

O righteous God, for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, see me as I fall down before you. Forgive my unfaithfulness in not having done your will, for you have promised mercy to me if I turn to you with my whole heart.

God requires that you shall put away all your idols.

I here from the bottom of my heart renounce them all, covenanting with you that no known sin shall be allowed in my life. Against your will, I have turned my love toward the world. In your power I will watch all temptations that will lead me away from you. For my own righteousness is riddled with sin, unable to stand before you.

Through Christ, God has offered to be your God again if you would let him.

Before all heaven and earth, I here acknowledge you as my Lord and God.

I take you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for my portion, and vow to give up myself, body and soul, as your servant, to serve you in holiness and righteousness all the days of my life.

God has given the Lord Jesus Christ as the only way and means of coming to God.

Jesus, I do here on bended knees accept Christ as the only new and living Way, and sincerely join myself in a covenant with him. O blessed Jesus, I come to you, hungry, sinful, miserable, blind, and naked, unworthy even to wash the feet of your servants. I do here, with all my power, accept you as my Lord and Head. I renounce my own worthiness, and vow that you are the Lord, my righteousness. I renounce my own wisdom, and take you for my only guide. I renounce my own will, and take your will as my law.

Christ has told you that you must suffer with him.

I do here covenant with you, O Christ, to take my lot with you as it may fall. Through your grace I promise that neither life nor death shall part me from you.

God has given holy laws as the rule of your life.

I do here willingly put my neck under your yoke, to carry your burden. All your laws are holy, just, and good. I therefore take them as the rule for my words, thoughts, and actions, promising that I will strive to order my whole life according to your direction, and not allow myself to neglect anything I know to be my duty.

The almighty God searches and knows your heart.

O God, you know that I make this covenant with you today without guile or reservation. If any falsehood should be in it, guide me and help me to set it aright. And now, glory be to you, O God the Father, whom I from this day forward shall look upon as my God and Father. Glory be to you, O God the Son, who have loved me and washed me from my sins in your own blood, and now is my Savior and Redeemer. Glory be to you, O God the Holy Spirit, who by your almighty power have turned my heart from sin to God. O mighty God, the Lord Omnipotent, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, you have now become my Covenant

Friend. And I, through your infinite grace, have become your covenant servant. So be it. And let the covenant I have made on earth be ratified in heaven. Amen.

You are advised to make this covenant not only in your heart, but in word; not only in word, but in writing. Therefore, with all reverence, lay the service before the Lord as your act and deed. And when you have done this, sign it. Then keep it as a reminder of the holy agreement between God and you that you may remember it during doubts and temptations.