

Sermon Text for January 1, 2017

Deuteronomy 31:9-13, John 15:1-5

Covenant Renewal Service

Well, Happy New Year to all of you. Have you ever thought what you mean when you say Happy New Year? The obvious is that you are wishing that the person to whom you are speaking is currently happy or at least will be happy in the New Year in which today we find ourselves. Now, when we say it in church, Happy New Year, it takes a bit of a different edge to it, at least it does to me. When I wish you Happy New Year I am wishing that this New Year will be one that your faith in Jesus Christ will provide you with more joy than you have ever had in your life. Being happy is one thing, being filled with joy is something completely different. Happiness comes from a superficial feeling of what the current situation holds. Joy comes from a deep rooted fundamental understanding of who we are regardless of our current situation. Joy comes from knowing that we have been created in the image of God and that still considers us one of His children.

But we have to remind ourselves of that. We have to remind ourselves that we are loved and that we have value and worth outside of what is happening in our lives. Our first Scripture we find a command that God gives to Moses to renew a covenant with him by reading the law in front of all the people. Not just those who were part of the nation of Israel but also those who happened to find themselves within the nation of Israel for whatever reason, marriage, work, slavery, immigrant, traveler. The purpose of this renewal of the covenant was so that those who may have forgotten who the Lord is and who we are in the sight of the Lord might be reminded.

We find ourselves on this side of the New Year after we have been through an incredibly damaging year for our nation as we found ourselves in the throes of the election. It doesn't matter who you supported or who you voted for, I think we can all agree that this past year was brutal, absolutely brutal to us as a people. We weren't unscathed as a church, some of us dipped our foot into the ring and landed some body blows at each other. Some of us forgot what it was that draws us together as a family and that is that we are children of God, not that we have a similar political or economic ideology.

But this past year has also been very kind to First Presbyterian in many ways. We continue to grow numerically as our attendance numbers climb in their second consecutive year. We aren't breaking records, but we are certainly bucking all the trends that mainline Presbyterian and other churches are following. Our average attendance over both service increased by 7 per

service with the second service holding steady while the first service increased. We kind of expected that for a variety of reason. Financially we brought in about 5 percent more income than the previous year and we were able to disburse over \$22,000 in funds to our various mission agencies that we support. Let me read them off to you, these are the ones that got increases of \$1,000 each one of them. That last M and F meeting is always like Christmas all over again as we are able to disburse thanks to your incredible generosity.

But as we take inventory of the year that has passed we also need to be reminded that we are called to primarily abide with our Savior Jesus Christ. While Deuteronomy reminds us that we are called to periodically renew our commitment to our Savior, John reminds us of what that relationship ought to look like. Did you hear that word abide mentioned 5 times just in these past 5 verses. I had Leo over at my house on Saturday and we had bought a peach tree in the middle of last year and he knows something about pruning trees. And we showed me where I should prune and as he was explaining it to me I'm thinking, but then you lose half of the branches which could mean losing half the fruit.

Jesus is not gentle or kind when he talks about the branches and the necessity of those branches bearing fruit. The reason why we need to remind ourselves periodically of who we are and who God is, is that we have to ask ourselves that question if we are abiding in Christ or not. We have tried over Advent to stress the importance of our relationship with Jesus through prayer. That is the primary way in which we are able to abide in Jesus. If we do not have a prayer life, then we are not abiding. It is as simple as that. And we are told that if we are not abiding then we are those branches which will be cut off and we will not be producing the fruit that we are called to produce.

This year is going to be the year that First Presbyterian will produce the kind of fruit that is long lasting and that isn't just here one year and then gone the next. We continue to be viewed as the place where you go in Strasburg if you are from the community and you need help. That is exciting to me. But we need to expand the possibilities that we can offer to people when they come here either for physical tangible needs or emotional and support needs. Some of you are here because you want to be a part of a family, something bigger than yourself. We need to be sure that we are able to plug people into the life of this church regardless of your demographic group. We lost a number of young couples last year who visited for a number of months but simply did not find this a home for them because we don't offer anything for that age group. We need to produce more fruit so that they can consider this home.

But it all starts today with our promise to our Savior that we are going to abide in him. Today we take an act that has been taken since Moses and turn our hearts and our minds and our voices to the Lord and rededicate ourselves to him. Let me tell you something about the covenant renewal service.

In 1775 John Wesley used this format for one of his services and credit goes to him for the content of this service. He in turn got the idea from a Puritan Richard Alleine 100 years earlier. Each year this service would be done during a New Year's Eve watchnight service. Wesley, who began the Methodist movement, found this service rich and meaningful as he expressed in his journal "Many mourned before God, and many were comforted.", and "It was, as usual, a time of remarkable blessing". Again in his diary he remarks "It was an occasion for a variety of spiritual experiences. I do not know that ever we had a greater blessing. Afterwards many desired to return thanks, either for a sense of pardon, for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation of His graces, healing all their backsliding." As you can see this can be a powerful service if you let it be.

If you would take out the booklet which is in your bulletin. Notice that the heart of this service is found in the Covenant Prayer. This prayer requires persons to commit themselves to God. This covenant is serious and we must take it seriously. At the beginning of the prayer I will pause for a few moments to allow people to kneel if they so desire, or to bow your head in respect to the Almighty God and to the step which we are about to take together in this prayer. We will be held responsible for that in which we take part, good or bad. Approach this service with reverence, seriousness, and an open heart to God.

You will notice that each bulleting contains a copy of the covenant service. On the last page of the service you will find a space where you can put your signature and the date. I want to encourage all of you to read through, pray through this service. If you feel that you are able to recommit or commit yourselves for the first time to the promises which are written in these pages then sign it, mark the date, and please call me or let me know that you have done that so that I can pray for you and so that we can talk about what is involved in this recommitment, or this commitment.

It is now the year 2017, we will be taking together the first Lord's Supper together of the New Year. But even more importantly today in this service you will be given an opportunity to embrace the new life that Jesus has chosen for you. How fitting it is that we will be able to recommit our lives to Christ and then together take part in the sign of that new commitment in the Covenant of the Lord's Supper. We will also have represented an opportunity for you to

remember your baptismal covenant by taking a blue bead from the font and take it home as a reminder of the covenant that you made today.

Let us now renew our promises before Almighty God.