

Sermon Text for January 7, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Jeremiah 31:31-34, Matthew 25:31-46 ***Covenant Renewal***

For over the past few months we have been concentrating on each one of us growing in our prayer, our Scripture and our action. If you have ever been to this church on the first Sunday of the year, which is this Sunday, then you have participated in the covenant renewal service which you have in front of you. The two are related and they are closely linked with both of our Scriptures that we have before us today.

We don't have a normal 18 minute sermon this first Sunday because we spend our time making a new covenant with our Lord, but a few words on the Scriptures which we read is important. We read in Jeremiah that God will one day establish a new covenant with us. That covenant, Jeremiah promises us in vs.33, will be written within us, it will be written upon our hearts. As a result of God's covenant written on our hearts then God will be our God and we will be the people of God. That simply is all that we want, isn't it?

Today we renew our covenant with the Lord, it is a time to ask ourselves the important questions that begins this year for us. We often find ourselves making New Year's resolutions. I am asking you to make a covenant, a promise, to have a closer walk with the Lord this year than you have ever had in your life. This is what we do at the beginning of the year, make these kinds of promises. As a church we are giving you opportunities to live out that promise, especially as we look at opportunities to pray, read Scripture, and act according to the will of God.

It is that last one that Matthew 25 addresses. What does it mean to act according to the will of God. Who remembers the word that we use to describe when we act according to the will of God? We call that righteousness. What does righteousness look like for us as individuals and what does it look like for us as a church. It means to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, welcome the stranger or immigrant, give clothing to the naked, care for the sick, visit the advocate for those in prison. This is what righteousness looks like. We can be determined to pray more and to read more Scripture, but if don't act according to righteousness it will all be no use.

Let's talk a little about this insert that you have in front of you. In 1775 John Wesley used this format for one of his services and credit goes to him for the content of this service. I was introduced to it when I began my ministry in 1995 in Portici, Italy, in a Methodist Church there. 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”. 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 bulletin 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 2024, 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 fountain and take it home as a reminder of the covenant that you made today.

Let us now renew our promises before Almighty God.