

Covenant for a New Year

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Mark 12: 28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”²⁹ Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”³² Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’;³³ and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

As we close out 2022 and begin the new year, it’s common this time of year to reflect on what has happened and to look forward to what’s ahead. It’s common to see on various social media outlets, posts that might say, “2022 was a rough year, but here comes 2023.” Or “My best memories from 2022. Hope to make some more.” For many people, the start of a new year is also a time to take on new commitments – you know to join the gym or to take up a new hobby or discipline. There’s just something about the end of one year and a beginning of a new one that makes us take a good look at things, to sort of take stock as to where we are in life and what, if anything, we need to do differently.

Most of you know that my ordination is through the United Methodist Church and the founder of what became the United Methodist Church was a man named John Wesley. I mention that because John Wesley believed that the beginning of every new year was a time to take stock of our covenant with God and to renew and reaffirm that covenant. Now, this wasn’t an idea unique to Wesley. In fact, he got this idea from the ancestors of many New England churches – the Puritans, who also believed the New Year was the time to examine our covenant with God. So at the beginning of each year, Wesley invited all the people in the churches that he supervised to participate in what he called a Covenant Renewal service.

This is a time, to reflect on what it means to try to be a follower of Jesus, what it means to be a member of the church, to remember what commitments we’ve made, and, most importantly, to remember what are the most essential aspects of our faith. In our gospel reading, Jesus was asked what is the greatest commandment and he gives us a straightforward answer – love – love God, love others, love ourselves. That’s it – if we are going to sum up what it means to be a Christian in a very simple, very straightforward way – it’s love. Christians are people who are committed to loving God, to loving others, and to loving ourselves.

As we examine our covenant with God for the new year, the question then that we all must ask ourselves is not are we following all the rules? Not are we letting in the right people. The question we must ask is are we becoming more loving. The mark of faith is always love.

And while that's a simple answer, it doesn't mean it's easy. It takes work. It takes discipline, and prayer, and meditation. And it's not a one-time moment where we all of a sudden just decide that we are going to be perfectly loving. Rather, it's a lifelong journey where we must strive to lean into service and let go of selfishness, lean into forgiveness and let go of bitterness, lean into love and let go of resentment.

Whenever I think of the journey of faith, I always think about hiking. Nature has always been my most important cathedral. It's where I feel closest to and most in awe of God. It's also where I can gain the most clarity about my life and the world around me. For more than twenty years now, I've tried to go on at least one long multi-night backpacking hike a year and a bucket list adventure for me would be to hike all of the Appalachian Trail. One of my favorite sections of the AT is in southwest Virginia in a highland meadow called the Grayson Highlands and as the trail winds out of those rolling hills, it actually passes through the middle of a small town, Damascus, VA.

And there in Damascus, there is a small congregation that has a really cool ministry. During the season when many of the long distance hikers come through Damascus, they open their doors and provide them with a place to sleep – inside, with running water, and homecooked food. In that small church, the hikers find a place to stop and reflect on the hike they've had and prepare for the hike they have left to do.

That's kind of what a covenant service is all about. Today is a time for us to stop and reflect on our journey towards perfect love and the journey we still have to make. And so I want to give us an opportunity to do that this morning. Fortunately, Wesley gives us a little guidance in terms of specific things we can do that he believed would help us in that journey.

The first is community. Wesley famously said, "There is no holiness apart from social holiness." In other words, to live out our faith, we need other people helping us. As you start a new year, perhaps one way to live more fully into your covenant would be to connect to one of our small groups – we have a women's brunch group, a men's breakfast group, a midlife men's meetup, several book study groups, and if none of these resonate with you, then maybe you'd be interested in starting another small group that would. If so, I'd love to talk to you about it.

Then Wesley offered three guidelines that he called the General Rules that were a way to live out a life of love for God and neighbor. The first is "Do no Harm." At the Covenant service, Wesley invited his community to consider the ways they may both consciously and unconsciously done harm. To consider if there's anyone from whom they need to ask for forgiveness. And finally to ponder if there's anything in their life they need to change so as to not harm others or themselves. So this morning, I invite us to consider the same thing:

Are their ways in which we are living that are harmful to others or to ourselves? Please join me in silent prayer as we lift those places up to God.

The second rule for Wesley is to “do good.” What opportunities to do we have to do good to others in our community, to make the world a better place, to do works of justice and mercy. Please join me in silent prayer as we ponder the opportunities we have to do good in the coming year.

Finally, the last was something Wesley called attend to the ordinances of God which, for him, meant spending time in worship and prayer, receiving Communion and reading Scripture, meditating and living mindfully. And so I invite you to simply spend a few moments in silence. Meditation upon God’s love and grace for you and for all.

The last thing I need to say this morning is that this covenant renewal service to help us more fully live into love is something we do as a response to God’s grace, not a condition to receive it. God already loves us, God already says yes to us, God already claims us. Our journey toward perfection in love, then, is always a response to what God has already done for us.

Wesley would end his covenant services with a prayer that reaffirms what he hoped both he and his community would be able to live into during the coming year. So I want to invite you to say that prayer with me on this New Year’s Day. Let us pray:

“I am no longer my own, but yours
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by you or laid aside for you,
exalted for you or brought low for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
you are mine, and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

Jesus, What a Wonderful Child – arranged by Michael Hassell