

10/22/2023

Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14, 21-28; 1 Corinthians 13

A Covenant

In the Old Testament lesson today, we heard a covenant God had made with His people. By the time Ezekiel wrote his book, the Israelite nation had ceased to exist. It had been divided into two different kingdoms, Israel and Judah, and had been scattered in exile. The original hearers of Ezekiel's message wanted to hear good news. They needed hope. And so, God gave Ezekiel words to remind them that He was in the process of making something new, out of what had been discarded as dead.

He's doing the same thing for us today. The question then becomes, "Why does God do it?" Why does God take something old and dead, and make it into a new, useful to Him thing? We're going to turn to Paul's first letter to the Church at Corinth to answer that. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to 1 Corinthians 13. **Read 1 Corinthians 13.**

In turning our lives over to Jesus Christ, He puts His own Spirit within us. He calls us to be changed into better image-bearers of God. Paul wrote this letter to the Church at Corinth because they had major problems. There were some people in Corinth who thought they could come to church on Sunday morning, with a Sunday face on, and go down the street to Aphrodite's temple to visit the ladies – if that's what you want to call them – afterwards. They thought they could say "I believe!" and just keep on living the same old way they'd been living.

Troubles at Corinth

There were other people in the Church at Corinth, who thought that they were a lot better than those brothers and sisters, because they were doing all sorts of good works and great things – like speaking in tongues. So they looked down their noses at other members of their church family. So Paul writes to correct them all – and us, too.

In the first three verses, Paul is talking to the "holier-than-thou" group who were looking down their noses. He says, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I'm only a resounding gong or clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but don't have love, I'm nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give up my body to hardship that I may boast, but don't have love, I gain nothing," (1 Cor. 13:1-3). He goes on to tell them – and this is a good reminder for us today – "Love is patient and kind. It doesn't envy or boast, and it's not proud," (verse 4).

Fifty years ago, the United Methodist Church was an established and stable group, but it's changing for a few reasons, all of which apply to us here specifically at New Hope: the pandemic, polarization, and exhaustion. As unsettling as all this disruption has become, we have a foundational promise from God: He is with us and for us! When we let our building – and our bodies – be dwelling places for God, we

make space for an unrelenting grace that stretches us, mystifies us, unravels us, and will ultimately heal us.

Bitter with the Sweet

Paul goes on, talking to the crowd in the Corinthian Church, and us today, when he writes, “Love doesn’t dishonor others, it’s not self-seeking, it’s not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love doesn’t delight in evil but rejoices with the truth,” (verses 5-6). If God’s dwelling place is here, then He’s with us. If He puts His own Holy Spirit in us, then He’s with us. We need to trust again in the nearness of His presence.

Back in the early 1970’s there was a singer named Carole King, who sang a little song called, *Bitter with the Sweet*. In it she sings, “Don’t let it get you down, my friend, Though it seems the blues will never end, On this you can depend, they always do And I can tell you that it’s true, It’s a feeling that can’t be beat, And you’ve got to do it, You’ve got to take the bitter with the sweet.” I can relate. If we’re being honest, I suspect each of you can, too. This new job I’ve taken through the County Office is bittersweet. I’m looking forward to the possibilities of adding value to kids’ lives who perhaps have been dealt a lousy hand, through situations and circumstances outside of their control – that’s the sweet part of the job. But here’s the bitter side of it. They purchased the Lockington Church building, and are renovating it to use as a school building. It makes me sad to think that it was once a vibrant church, but it died during Covid. There were faithful people who attended there week after week, year after year, who had to find a new church home – or who didn’t and became unchurched.

As a denomination, and as a local church, we must learn again that God’s dwelling place is with us. Paul tells us, “Where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears,” (verses 8-10). As followers of Jesus, we have to get back to the basics of our faith – and that means doing the hard work of intentionally forming disciples, even for those with whom we find it hard to relate.

God Is With Us and For Us

Sometimes we hear this Scripture read during weddings. First Corinthians 13 is known as “the Love Chapter.” It can be useful in marriages. It’s a good reminder for us as far as how love is supposed to look – and we see very clear evidence of God’s love displayed through Bruce and Janice Michael’s Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary. We’re going to join them in reaffirming their marriage covenant momentarily. There’s more to this Scripture than weddings, though. It’s about the love of God. The love of God is patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, and not proud (verse 4). The love of God “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres, and never fails,” (verses 7-8a). To truly let Him live in and through us, love cannot be for us a sentiment. It has to be sacrificial, as Christ is sacrificial. He went to the cross to purchase us from sin and death.

The love of God commands us then, to stay at the table with other disciples who are imperfect. To be patient with them, just as our Father is patient with us, as He works with us to remove our defects. We know God is dwelling in us, and with us as we become more loving – and not just tolerant – towards people outside our local church, those who are sinners, and those who we believe to be our enemies. Letting God’s love work in and through us causes us to be changed. Paul says, “When I was a child, I talked like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the childish ways behind me. Right now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I will know fully, even as I am fully known,” (verses 11-12).

Our amazing, loving God knows us. He knows the struggles we have here at New Hope. He sees you. He’s here, with you. He’s calling us as a local church to reconsider the way we have made decisions in the past, and how we’ve wanted to be set apart from others. He wants us to find ourselves making space for something greater that He wants to give to us. He wants to pour out His unrelenting grace on us, and on the whole world, as a free gift. He gives us that in Jesus Christ.

Over the next four weeks, we’ll be talking more about the unrelenting grace of God, and how it saves and connects us. I hope we’ll open ourselves up to hear what it is that God, through the blood of Christ crucified, is calling each of us to do, to live into the covenant relationship He’s given: to make disciples, for the transformation of the world. “These three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love,” (verse 13). God IS with us and for us!

Prayer: New every day is Your love, great God of Light, and all day long You are working for good in the world. Stir up in us desire to serve You, to live peacefully with our neighbors and all Your creation, and to devote each day to Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

At this time, I’d like Bruce and Janice to make their way up to the chancel.

An Order For the Reaffirmation of the Marriage Covenant (BOW 135)

Greeting

Friends, we are gathered together in the sight of God to witness and bless the reaffirmation of the marriage covenant, which was established by God, who created us male and female for each other. With His presence and power Jesus graced a wedding at Cana of Galilee, and in His sacrificial love gave us the example for the love of husband and wife.

Reaffirmation of the Marriage Covenant (*Couple faces each other, join hands, and speak directly to each other, repeating the vows*).

In the name of God, and with a thankful heart, I once again declare that I, Bruce, take you, Janice, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

In the name of God, and with a thankful heart, I once again declare that I, Janice, take you, Bruce, to be my husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.

Congregational Response

Let us pray.

Eternal God, Creator and Preserver of all Life, Author of Salvation, Giver of all Grace: Bless and sanctify with Your Holy Spirit Janice and Bruce, who have reaffirmed their marriage covenant. Enable them to grow in love and peace with You and with each other all their days, that they may reach out in concern and service to the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessing of the Marriage

Lord our God, Bless Janice and Bruce. We thank You for their marriage, for the children and grandchildren they have nurtured, and for all the good they have done. As You blessed the love of their youth, continue to bless their life together with gifts of peace and joy. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, Your Son, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.

God the Eternal keep you in love with each other, so that the peace of Christ may abide in your home. Go to serve God and your neighbor in all that you do. Amen.