

Did you know? The word covenant is used approximately three hundred times in the Bible. Permeating both the Old and New Testament, covenant is a central theme throughout Scripture. In fact, what we normally call the Old Testament and New Testament are really the Old Covenant and New Covenant. The Old Covenant built on promises made with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David- God’s chosen people- the Israelites. The New Covenant sealed in Christ’s blood, shed for you and for me, for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus declared this boldly as he was gathered in the Upper Room with the disciples on the night he was betrayed and arrested.

The definition of the English, Hebrew, and Greek words for covenant give insight into the concept of a covenant. A covenant is ***a formal, extremely solemn and binding agreement based upon a common purpose, often secured by a blood sacrifice, which binds two parties together as one for life.***

As an intentional action flowing out of the renewal of our covenant with God, celebrated through the reaffirmation of our baptism, we now need to live into our covenant as best we can, as best we are able, as best we know how, as best as God empowers and enables us. Why?

One, and not the most important but still valid, is the fact that we don’t want to be known as liars or disloyal to the promises we make. We have made a covenant promise with God, to be God’s people, to praise God together in worship, to learn from Christ and the Word, to love God and love our neighbors, to walk with one another in and through life, to give of our time and talent and treasures. What would it mean then if we turn our back on these things and don’t faithfully do what we can, what we are able, and what we know, or don’t lean into God with faith that God will empower and enable us? To be clear, the goal is not to guilt us into it. We don’t follow God and enter into a covenant relationship out of guilt or shame or the fear of what will happen if we don’t do the right things- the fear of being called a liar or hypocrite. We follow God and enter into a covenant relationship because of God’s promises that make us whole even if and when we don’t do the right things. We follow God and enter into a covenant relationship because of God’s love, grace, and mercy, which are unconditional. We follow God and enter into a covenant relationship because God seeks us out, claims us, and declares, “I am the good shepherd and you are the sheep of my flock.”

John 3:16 is said to be the entire gospel of good news in verse: “For God so loved the world that God sent his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” Indeed, this is good news for all. But listen to verse 17 that follows for it adds on to God’s intention for Jesus, “For God did not his Son into the world to condemn the world (to make you feel guilty or shameful), but to save the world through him.” I don’t believe the foundation of my covenant relationship with God was meant to be built on guilt and shame, *commitment out of obligation* or extortion, if you will. And I certainly don’t want to be considered a liar or disloyal to the promise I have made to God. What then? What I can do is all I can, with all my ability and knowledge, to lean into God with trust and faith that God will help melt me, mold me, fill me, and use me through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. I can put my loyalty to God at the forefront of my every day, every breath, every action, thought, or motive.

The second reason why we now need to live into our covenant is because God calls us and commands us to. God says, “Love!” God says, “Go! And do likewise.” God says, “Share the good news.” God says, “Do not fear, for I am with you.” God says, “Take courage! Trust me! Believe in me!” These aren’t suggestions. These are commands. And when God commands us, it is in our best interest to be obedient to God’s call. Let’s call it *commitment out of obedience*. Now, we may not always like the idea of “obedience.” But when it comes to being faithful to our covenant relationship, being obedient to God’s will and God’s way is at the heart and soul.

What does being obedient to God look like? I am tempted to paint the picture of a dog going to obedience training, but I will refrain. Mostly because we are not dogs, but more importantly, God has given us the ability to be more proactive and intentional in our faithfulness. God has made everything known to us what is God’s will. Yes, through the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and also in the Word.

There is a section of 1 Peter 4 that has been titled in the NIV- *Living for God*. In the NRSV the same section is titled- *Good Stewards of God’s Grace*. Perhaps being good stewards of God’s grace is the picture of what it looks like to live for God. 1 Peter 4:7-11 says, “**The end of all things is near; therefore be serious and discipline yourselves for the sake of your prayers.** ⁸ **Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins.** ⁹ **Be hospitable to one another without complaining.** ¹⁰ **Like good stewards of the manifold**

grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. ¹¹Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.”

This very text has been at the root of our Session’s discussions the last few years, particularly in conversations of leadership structure for ministry focuses and responsibilities. What was and can still be derived from the text is the call for us as Christ’s church to praise God (prayer, proclamation, and music), explore, discover, and grow, serve, love, help, feed others, be hospitable, and share our gifts with one another. Simply put, we have interpreted this to mean we are called to worship, education, outreach, and resources. Living into our covenant relationship with God as Christ’s church can look like this. We are going to be talking about each of these much more throughout the rest of this month as a way to spark our new program year so stay tuned.

I have learned that life is not always that neat, clean, and simple. What then? Living into our covenant relationship with God may also look just like a person who has fallen to their knees, with arms held out wide and hands open, humble and hoping for all God has to offer. If you think about it, is there a more obedient posture than being on your knees with your hands and your heart wide open, saying “Here, I Am Lord.” This posture to the world may appear to be one of desperation or defeat, but to God it is a posture of courage and strength. For when we go to God on our knees, God will lift us up. For when we go to God with open hands, God will fill them. For when we go to God with longing hearts, God will heal and mend.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, holding fast to our covenant with God is how we are to live. I won’t ask you to get on your knees, for some of us, including me, might not get back up 😊, but I would like to invite you to open your hands. And as our hands are open, I invite us to hear the words of a song called “Come to the Table” by Sidewalk Prophets.

*We all start on the outside... The outside looking in... This is where grace begins
We were hungry we were thirsty... With nothing left to give... Oh, the shape that we were in
Just when all hope seemed lost... Love opened the door for us... He said come to the table*

*Come join the sinners who have been redeemed... Take your place beside the Savior...
Sit down and be set free... Come to the table...
Come meet this mighty crew of misfits... These liars and these thieves
There's no one unwelcome here... That sin and shame that you brought with you...
You can leave it at the door... And let mercy draw you near
So, come to the table...*

*To the thief and to the doubter... To the hero and the coward
To the prisoner and the soldier... To the young and to the older
All who hunger all who thirst... All the last and all the first
All the paupers and the princess... All who fail, you've been forgiven
All who dream and all who suffer... All who loved and lost another
All the chained and all the free... All who follow all who lead
Anyone who's been let down... All the lost you have been found
All who have been labeled right or wrong... To everyone who hears this song*

Come to the table

Come join the sinners you have been redeemed... Take your place beside the Savior...

Sit down and be set free... Come to the table...

Sit down and be set free... Come to the table...