

Jan. 3, 2010

Matthew 2:1-12, Jeremiah 31:31-34

Epiphany/Wesley Covenant Renewal Sunday

Hearts and Minds

It seems like we hear way too much these days about wives and husbands cheating on each other. It seems to be way too common that people are unfaithful to their spouses. I wouldn't say it's acceptable to people, though. In fact, it seems to be less and less acceptable all the time, but that doesn't seem to stop it from happening.

Actors, singers, athletes---their infidelities are all over the news. You can hardly avoid knowing all the latest details of all the sordid affairs.

Infidelity. Betraying the trust and the commitment of marriage.

Breaking the covenant between two people to love each other in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, keeping oneself only to the other, as long as you both shall live.

It seems horrifyingly common-place these days.

And pre-nuptial agreements, which are legal documents, seem to have replaced vows of love and fidelity. They predetermine who will get what when the couple divorces, and those divorces often happen because one person cheated on the other.

Marriage, once a covenant, has become a legal agreement between two people, one that can be broken too easily.

But covenants in the Bible are not so easily broken.

We read in scripture about a number of covenants between God and the people. God made a covenant with Noah never to send a flood on the entire earth again. God made a covenant with Abraham and Sarah to give them many offspring and the land that included the country of Israel. God made a covenant with David that there would always be a king of his line on the throne of Israel.

And God made a covenant with the people that they would be his people and he would be their God.

God kept that covenant faithfully, even when the people broke it time and time and time again.

The people were unfaithful, but God was not.

The people kept falling away, failing to fulfill their part of the covenant. Instead of being God's people and loving God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength, they failed to be faithful. They failed to trust God enough, failed to be obedient, failed to live as God's people, different and distinct from the people around them who worshipped other gods.

And so as often as they broke it, the people had to renew their side of the covenant with God. Time and time again.

The Law of Moses was there to help the people remain the people of God, but they found it too hard to follow.

Written on tablets of stone and on scrolls, it became too long and too difficult to follow. There were too many details to remember, too many rules to obey. Over 500 laws are written in the Old Testament.

That's too many commandments and laws that went too much against human nature, too much that was too hard for people to obey.

And so Jeremiah speaks God's words-----I will put my Law within them and write it on their hearts. They will no longer teach it to each other, because all of them will already know it.

The Law will be within them---they will already know it in their minds and it will be written on their hearts.

Several hundred years after Jeremiah's time, Jesus Christ talked a lot about the New Covenant he had come to fulfill. This New Covenant is what Jeremiah was talking about. A covenant not written on stone or scrolls, not written on paper and filed as a legal document, but a covenant written on our hearts, within us in our minds. Something we already know and don't need to learn.

Jesus Christ told us that the two greatest commandments are to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This covenant is written on our hearts. It's what we long to do, but there's a problem.

We cannot do it on our own, and the world tells us that we need to be strong, independent, and self-sufficient. The demands of day-to-day living, of working to put food on the table and a roof over our heads takes precedence over the ways of living according to the New Covenant.

And so, just like the ancient Hebrews, we struggle and strive and break the New Covenant as often as they broke the old one.

We forget what we are called by God to be and to do. We forget that we are God's beloved children—that we are his people and he is our God!

The new year is a time for fresh starts, for resolutions to become better people, to break old habits and begin better ones.

Part of that for us as Christians is to remember who we are and whose we are, to remember the covenant we have with God and to dedicate ourselves again to become the people that God created us to be.

Like an unfaithful husband or wife who is determined to reconcile and make the marriage work, we can rededicate ourselves to the covenant God has made with us. We can refuse to give in to the legalism of labelling ourselves good or bad and remember that God loves us, that God will forgive us all our iniquity, all our mistakes, all our unfaithfulness, and that God will remember our sin no more.

God is still our God, and we are still God's people, no matter how unfaithful we have been and how many times we have fallen away.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany, the day we remember that the wise men came from far away to worship the baby Jesus. You may wonder what all of this talk about covenants has to do with the wise men.

The connection is this----the wise men had studied the stars for years, looking for a sign that a new king was born to the Jews, to God's chosen people. When they saw that sign, that bright star in the sky, they left their comfortable homes, their old way of life, everything they knew, and they followed that star.

They followed God's call to worship Jesus Christ, who had come to save not only the Jews but the whole world.

The new covenant of salvation through Christ had already been written on their hearts, and they were faithful to it. Faithful enough to come a long distance and worship the newborn king. Faithful enough to disobey Herod and obey God. Matthew tells us that after they found and worshipped the baby, they avoided going back to Herod as he had ordered them. Instead of obeying Herod, an earthly king, they went home by "another way."

Another way----another way to live! Another covenant which is written on our hearts and minds and not just in a book. Another call to love. Another call ----

Another chance to be the people God has called us to be.

The service of covenant renewal dates back about 250 years to the time of John Wesley, the founder of our denomination. He felt it was important to remind ourselves of the covenant we have with God. We need to remember that God is faithful to us and it is important to be faithful to God.

Without this kind of reminder, it will be too hard to keep our part of our covenant with God. Without asking for the help of the Holy Spirit, and being aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, it is impossible for us to keep ourselves obedient to God and not the world.

I would invite you to sign and keep a copy of the covenant prayer where you will see it often. Remember that we are God's people and that the new covenant of Jesus Christ is written on our hearts and firmly rooted in our minds.

Let us renew our covenant with God.

Amen.

