

Each year, John Wesley - the founder of Methodism and one of my favorite theologians - would begin the New Year with a Covenant Service. You will find the covenant he composed in your bulletin. I ask that you look over it as I speak as I shall come back to it in the end. I like the idea of a covenant service at the beginning of the year because so often we attempt to start many things at the beginning of the year –such as new weight loss or activity plans, new goals for work or school, or for some, a resolution to have no resolutions. I believe each of these resolutions, or lack of resolutions, should be framed by our relationship with the Divine.

Our scripture today states that you are each of a child of God and therefore have access to all that God has to offer. As I'm sure you noticed, the scripture is also very concerned with the Law and being freed. Scholars such as Mark Powell and Bart Erhman believe that Paul wrote this letter to the people residing in Northern Galatia, modern Turkey, in protest of an alternate gospel that the residents were following which endorsed first becoming a Jew before becoming Christian. Paul, in essence, proposed that Christ was sent to free people from the rules. Many theologians of the Reformation Era such as John Calvin and Martin Luther took what Paul said about “works under the law” and translated it to mean that good works were not essential to salvation; rather, one was saved by grace alone. While I think that Paul was concerned with the

problem at hand, the erroneous gospel, rather than grace versus good works; I'd like to move on to explore what the "grace of God" means. Just so you know, Paul mentions the gift of grace in Romans and in both Corinthian letters.

So what is this gift of grace, the grace of God? Though I have a topical Bible and the internet at my hands, I could not find a well-supported, clear definition of grace as referred to by Paul that I liked. Grace as a classical Greek term meant favor and/or power bestowed by the gods on a person or thing that moved them to miraculous deeds. The Hebrew translation of this word also comes out as favor. However, from the Christian view defined by Paul and those after him grace comes to be defined more as mercy, as some sort of combination of bestowing favor while forgiving. Nonetheless, one isn't given God's favor in order to remain the same as they were; favor is bestowed so one can move towards miraculous deeds, or as today's scripture says toward receiving God's inheritance. What does this mean to you?

Paul says we are free from the Law by the grace of God; yet by its very definition grace calls us to do something. So, what are we to do? In ancient times, a covenant was formed when God made promises with certain expectations from the recipients. For example, the Sinai covenant in which God promises to take care of the Israelites, his chosen people, as long as they obeyed the Laws provided (see Exodus and Deuteronomy for Laws). Jesus was

seen as a new covenant between God and his chosen people whereby as long as people believe in Christ they are forgiven/saved. The UCC is a covenantal church as we have no high authority like a bishop who makes major decisions.

The following is from The UCC bylaws, Article III:

*Within the United Church of Christ, the various expressions of the church relate to each other in a covenantal manner. Each expression of the church has responsibilities and rights in relation to the others, to the end that the whole church will seek God's will and be faithful to God's mission. Decisions are made in consultation and collaboration among the various parts of the structure. As members of the Body of Christ, each expression of the church is called to honor and respect the work and ministry of each other part. Each expression of the church listens, hears, and carefully considers the advice, counsel, and requests of others. In this covenant, the various expressions of the United Church of Christ seek to walk together in all God's ways.*

As a UCCer we work together in grace, to do miraculous things to make the world more like what God had envisioned. We live in covenant with one another and with God.

And now back to my Methodists roots and the Wesleyan New Year Covenant. Paul has reminded us that we are free from the ancient laws, thus you can have pepperoni pizza today for lunch. However, with this freedom and grace comes much power. You are favored by God and thus you can do miraculous things, but you have to choose to do them. As this New Year begins and you think about a new you or a continued sense of self where does God's grace fit in? For John Wesley, everything was to be done for and with God. If you've read over the covenant in the bulletin and have grasped its meaning you

may agree with me it's scary. It's easier to ask for blessings, a good job and suitable home than it is to ask God to let everything be God's will. What if it's God's will to shake up your life? Are you willing to live by grace alone if your life will look like Job's or if you are called away from your work with steady paycheck to work solely for God, with an unsteady, sometimes doubtful paycheck? How far are you willing to go?

In the words of John Wesley I invite you to join with me in the covenant prayer:

The Prayer of Invitation from this service follows:

Commit yourselves to Christ as his servants. Give yourselves to him, that you may belong to him.

Christ has many services to be done. Some are more easy and honorable; others are more difficult and disgraceful. Some are suitable to our inclinations and interests, others are contrary to both.

In some we may please Christ and please ourselves. But then there are other works where we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

It is necessary, therefore, that we consider what it means to be a servant of Christ. Let us, therefore, go to Christ, and pray:

Let me be your servant, under your command. I will no longer be my own. I will give up myself to your will in all things.

Lord, make me what you will. I put myself fully into your hands:

put me to doing, put me to suffering,

let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,

let me be full, let me be empty,

let me have all things, let me have nothing.

I freely and with a willing heart

give it all to your pleasure and disposal.

I do here covenant with you, O Christ,

to take my lot with you as it may fall.

Through your grace I promise

that neither life nor death shall part me from you.

I make this covenant with you, O God,

without guile or reservation.

If any falsehood should be in it, guide me

and help me to set it aright.

Mighty God,

let this covenant I have made on earth

be ratified in heaven

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

John Wesley, circa 1780