

**SLD01.10.09 2<sup>nd</sup> Ordinary**  
**EPC**  
**John 15:1-8**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **A Re-Commitment to Christ, and Christ's Mission**

You'll notice this morning that instead of the typical sermon with a capital "S," with evocative sermon title, what's listed today in your bulletins is a "Brief Homily." The reason why is that today's worship is less about what I have to say about the Word of God than what you and I have to say in *response* to God's Word. That is, having received the Word of God for all of 2009 (and, for most of us, many years prior), today on this early Sunday in 2010, we're invited to offer a word back. With all due respect to the Word of God, today's service is more about *our* word, *our* response, *our reply, action, and reaction* to the Word of God. For today we arrive once again at what has become an annual ritual of the New Year, a service of personal re-commitment to Christ.

If this doesn't sound Presbyterian, it's because it's not. The ritual we borrow unapologetically each year is from the beautiful Wesleyan Covenant Service, first introduced in 1755 by John Wesley, from whose insight and leadership was founded the Methodist tradition. Knowing that the personal road of discipleship can be quite arduous, Wesley had a deep understanding of the heartfelt need of Jesus' disciples periodically to look their discipleship square in the face and choose whether or not to carry on with it. What with all the half-hearted attempts and whole-hearted failures along the path of following Jesus, one might well wonder whether it's worth the trouble to keep walking it. The effort required to sustain a community of faith is no cakewalk, either. Working in and through the church, it's easy for lay and ordained alike to forget

just why we keep working at building and nourishing a body of believers. We might even start imagining that discipleship is all about what we do, what we initiate or program or produce, and that we're not seeing ample results,

So once a year, we pause to consider what it is we in the church are up to, what we're about, who is the Source and what is the End of all our labors, and whether or not we're up to still fooling with it. Truth is, over and over and over again we get to hear and see and experience God's faithful commitment to us. Today we're given an opportunity to make a commitment back, to renew our covenant with God, to re-up our end of the bargain.

I'm not talking here about some exercise of creed or dogma, some promise of doing or being something other than who and how we are. What I'm talking about is a claiming of who and how we are in relation to God, creatures of a loving creator who has high hopes and expectations for our flourishing. Today we set the intention to trust what we understand about our God, and, with as much confidence as we can muster, surrender to God's power to empower and guide and sustain us along the Way.

Jesus says he abides in us and that apart from him we can do nothing. Okay. Today we agree to, as best as we are able, abide in him.

You remember Jeremiah 31 how God says, "the days are surely coming when I will make a new covenant (with my people.) I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jer. 31:31-33) Well, today is when we stand and affirm that "yes, you are our God, and we are your people."

In case you're worried about signing up for something you can't deliver, understand that today's re-commitment is really more a hope than a promise, more an intention than a contract. In fact, take the words of the covenant seriously and no way any of us would be able to sign on the dotted line. But, as far as I'm concerned, without that intention, without that commitment and surrender, without that trust and hope and anticipation of meeting the God who meets us, all the busyness and duties and demands of church life flat aren't worth a wooden nickel. So the first focus of today's service is an opportunity for each of us to remember and renew our personal covenant with the One who creates, redeems and sustains us.

But there's another component of today's service, too, one that's also about our end of the bargain.

A good decade ago, a bunch of people in this church worked hard and long on a covenant of faith that defines who we are at Emory Church, what we intend to do and how we intend to be with one another and with the world beyond our walls. I didn't think to have it printed in today's bulletin but since we often repeat it as our Affirmation of Faith during worship, surely most of us are familiar with it.

It begins with these words: Every member in prayer and ministry. *Every member in prayer and ministry.* Remember that. Then it goes like this - this is what we affirm most Sundays:

God creates and calls us; Jesus reconciles and redeems us;  
the Spirit energizes and empowers us for worship, love, and service!  
In response to God's love and forgiveness, we pledge  
to inspire each other to prayer, study, and stewardship,  
to cultivate an open, caring church, where diverse gifts are  
discovered, respected, and employed;

to minister faithfully to the poor, lonely, sick, and those in need;  
to reach out, sharing our faith, inviting and welcoming others  
into our fellowship; and  
to seek justice and healing in the church, community, and world.

Well, it's that last part – seeking justice and healing in the church, community and world, that is getting a lot of attention and energy in our church these days. That and ministering faithfully to the poor, lonely, sick, and those in need. And all that falls under Mission.

To be sure, all the other stuff in our covenant is true and valuable and worth continuing to nourish. But it's Mission where I sense the most interest and energy and leadership and excitement percolating into action. Whether across continents or across town, it's Mission that pulls us out of ourselves and awakens us to the larger world. It's Mission that reminds us what all the fuss about faith is really about. It's Mission that's the most effective not only at serving others but serving ourselves by building community, embodying faith and having fun. There's just something so satisfying about shutting up for a minute and just *doing* faith instead of all the time talking about it!

So EPC's dynamic Mission committee set about organizing an entire year of *doing faith*, in areas meaningful to this church and in manageable and accessible ways. In bite-size chunks, you might say. In diverse, achievable and bite-size chunks of service in which anyone and everyone in this church can participate in one manner or another. And my, and Session's, and Mission's hope is that anyone and everyone in this church *will*, in fact, participate in these diverse, achievable and bite-size chunks of service in one manner or another.

Seriously. Everybody. Remember? *Every member in prayer and ministry.* And not just every member; but every *friend* of the church, too. And every *visitor*. And everybody who drops by, or uses the facility, or affiliates with the church, or lives in the neighborhood, or visits our website. You get the idea.

Sure, we're just a pretty little semi-urban church, but *Mission, service, changing the world in diverse, achievable, bite-size chunks is what we want this church to be about.*

You'll find in your bulletins the list of mission opportunities planned for 2010. Maybe you've even looked it over while I've been preaching. If not, you'll get another chance in the service, after our recommitment to Christ and before communion, to look at the list again. And not just to look at it but to consider it prayerfully and to mark the ways in which, having chosen to abide in Christ, you will participate in Emory Church's mission in the coming year. Maybe you can wield a hammer or a hoe, or maybe you can make cupcakes, or maybe you can spare some clothes, or maybe you can pray for the efforts of others.... Whatever it is, there's nobody here who can't do *something* on this list. So today and for the next several weeks we'll be making this list available to folks so each of us can make at least one specific commitment to a mission of this church. *Every member in prayer and ministry* – that's what we're going for.

So today, after we've completed the Wesleyan Covenant Service, you'll have a few minutes to look over the list and respond to God's call. And then we'll move into the communion portion of today's service, wherein once again Jesus will feed us with his bounty. And when you come forward for communion by intinction, I invite you to

sign and bring with you one half of the page of the list of mission opportunities. That means there'll be some tearing of paper. Don't worry about it.

Both halves of the paper are the same. One half is for you to keep for your records; the other for you to complete and bring forward during communion, so that a member of Mission can contact you to help you fulfill your call.

Friends, today we have the opportunity to re-commit our lives both to Christ, and to Christ's mission in the world in order to fulfill a covenant in which God doesn't meet us halfway, but *all* the way, the moment, even *before* the moment, that we breathe our assent.

And let us do so with full heart and intention, knowing that with God all things are possible, that in any covenant God doesn't meet us halfway, but *all* the way...the moment...even before...we breathe our assent.

To the glory of God. Amen.