

There will be two parts to this sermon today. My part, the sermon. Your part, participating in our Wesleyan Covenant Renewal. First my part...the sermon.

So I heard about a newspaper reporter who went to interview a successful small business owner. "How did you do it?" he asked. "How did you make all this money?"

"I'm glad you asked," the businessman said. "It's a great story. When my wife and I married, we started out with a roof over our heads, some food in our pantry, and five cents between us. I took that nickel, went down to the grocery store, bought an apple, shined it up, and sold it for ten cents. "

"What did you do then?" the reporter asked.

"Well," he said, "I bought two more apples, shined them up, and sold them for twenty cents." The reporter was on the edge. This was going to be it. The reporter landed on a great human-interest story. He asked excitedly, "Then what?" The businessman replied, "My father-in-law died and left us \$20 million".

Yes, that's funny, but it begs the question. Why did the small business owner succeed? It wasn't because of his own inventiveness. It was because he was connected. What does it mean to be connected? Here are some thoughts. First, it means that we have power. When we say we have connections, it means that we have access to power. It means that we can get things done.

When we are connected to each other through our faith in Jesus Christ, it means that we are stronger, and we can get things done. Our faith gets nourishment and strength from both Christ and our fellow believers. As our faith strengthens, it bears fruit in the form of bringing benefit to ourselves and to the lives of others while doing God's work in the world.

Being connected also means is that we have a presence. We are not alone. Someone shares our lives. Someone is there for us, just like all of you are here for each other. If we abide with Christ, it means that we have a close, daily relationship with him. We become a branch of the

vine called Christianity—a branch that bears fruit. This means our wants will be Jesus' wants, we will pray according to Jesus words, which means that Jesus will be pleased with our prayers.

Finally, being connected means that we will live a productive life. A vine and its fruit point to the giftedness of discipleship while also indicating the substance that will sustain new branches and abundant fruit. The relationship between the vine and the branches, as well as the connection between source and fruit, lies in the love between God and Jesus, and between Jesus and us. In other words, we are to love one another as Christ has loved us

We can only be grafted to Christ by cutting our attachment to our way of life and its creature comforts just like a gardener prunes bushes to make them grow better. The useless branches have to be removed in order to save and strengthen the stronger ones, much like a surgeon may cut off a diseased limb in order to save a person's life. That is how we become truly fruitful and how we multiply grace. Let us pray.

Now for your part. But first let me say a bit about this service. We must start by travelling back in time to 1660. There we will meet up with a Puritan by the name of Richard Alleine. He wrote a book called *Vindiciae Pietatis: or, "A Vindication of Godliness in the Greater Strictness and Spirituality of It"*. Sounds serious, doesn't it? Well the Puritan archbishop of the time didn't think so, because he rejected it. Still, it caught the attention of John Wesley a century later. From this publication the covenant prayer was born. It was adopted into the growing Methodist movement in 1755.

Wesley loved this prayer and service so much he spoke about it frequently, saying things like *"Many mourned before God, and many were comforted" and "It was, as usual, a time of remarkable blessing" (October 1765). "It was an occasion for a variety of spiritual experiences ... I do not know that ever we had a greater blessing. Afterwards many desired to return thanks, either for a sense of pardon, for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation of His graces, healing all their backslidings"*

In London they began to make this a ritual service for New Year's Day. The heart of the service, focused in the Covenant Prayer, leads us to a renewed commitment to God. So this should be taken seriously.

As your pastor, I commit to the responsibility of assisting you as lay members to engage in a variety of spiritual disciplines.

We will now proceed with the liturgy. You should all have a copy of the covenant. After we complete the liturgy, I will give you a few moments to reflect and then sign your covenant. These are yours to take home and put in a place where you can see it.