

“What Do You Expect?”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, September 18, 2005

Text: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 I Peter 4:7-11 NRSV

Opening prayer: Holy Spirit, come and open our hearts and minds to receive your truth today. Amen.

LOVE AND EXPECTATIONS

What does God expect of you – and me? What do we expect of one another as members of this Christian community called Duke Memorial United Methodist Church? In other words, what is our responsibility to God and to one another? That is the question for today.

Sometimes we can have different expectations, and that leads to confusion. A young man reported to his first day of work at a hardware store. He went to the manager who welcomed him to work. The manager handed him a broom and said, “The first thing that I would like you to do is to sweep out the store.” The young man was taken aback. He finally stammered, “But I am a college graduate.” The manager replied, “Oh, I see. Well, hand me the broom back, and I will show you how.”

That manager and the new employee had some different expectations. What does God expect of us?

1,500 years ago, St. Augustine said, “Love God and do as you please.” The key to that command is the “love God” part. Most of us need a little more guidance than that!

The book of Deuteronomy is very clear as to what God expects: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) Jesus reaffirmed this teaching when he called it the greatest commandment of all. God also expects us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Because God loves us, we love God and love others through a covenant relationship. You and I are in covenant with God. We are also in covenant with one another.

The covenant of membership in the Wesleyan tradition and in the United Methodist Church is a commitment to spiritual disciplines: Will you pray with us? Will you study the Bible and worship God with us? Will you give financially with us to support this mission? The tithe, 10% of income, is the minimum biblical standard. Will you serve the Lord with us in the areas in which you are gifted?

Our participation in these spiritual disciplines that God expects of us, and that we expect of one another is not meant to be a burden. Jesus Christ tells us that as his disciples, it is the way to true life. Real life is found through prayer and worship, stewardship and service.

Another way to put it is: A member of Duke Memorial United Methodist Church:

- has accepted Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord,
- practices a private devotional life of prayer and Bible study,
- worships God regularly,
- invests time, talents, and financial resources in the church,
- is helping in a significant area of Christian service,
- and has established important relationships with others in the church.

Some participants in our church have not arrived at this level of commitment. All of us are at varying levels of spiritual growth and maturity. The goal is for each of us to be growing in our faith and spiritual life.

The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church puts it this way: “A member is bound in sacred covenant to shoulder the burdens, share the risks and celebrate the joys of fellow members.” (paragraph 219) This reflects the apostle Paul’s teaching in Romans: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” (Romans 12:15), and in Galatians: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2)

The Discipline also says, “A member of the United Methodist Church is to be a servant of Christ on mission in the local and worldwide community. This servanthood is performed in family life, daily work, recreation and social activities, responsible citizenship, and the stewardship of property and accumulated resources.”

PRAYERS, PRESENCE, GIFTS AND SERVICE

The primary covenant of membership in the Wesleyan tradition asks us, “Will you pray, attend, give and serve?”

The purpose of prayer is to develop a relationship with God. Our relationship with God requires a willingness on our behalf to take time to be with God, to enjoy the presence of God, to keep working at friendship with God, to become attuned to God’s nearness in all our life. It doesn’t matter when you pray or where you pray. It only matters that you pray.

The main reason we pray is not to do, to speak, or to think. It is not to present God with our daily lists of wants and requests – like God was some sort of cosmic Santa

Claus. The main reason we pray is to enjoy being with God the same way we enjoy being with any good friend.

Prayer is listening to God as well as speaking to God. In his book, *Living Prayer*, Robert Benson writes, “We cannot be filled with God until we are not so full of ourselves . . . It can be a little intimidating to give direction to the Lord of the Universe. It makes many of us nervous. The ones who are not should be.” (p. 27, 141) Think about it. Often it is better to listen for God’s direction to us than for us to be directing God.

Another expectation, another part of the covenant of membership is to study the Bible and to worship God together.

The Bible is a record of God’s faithful interaction with people over thousands of years. It is our guidebook for abundant life. It was a special moment to present Bibles to our third-grade students during worship last Sunday. The Bible has so much to teach us about who God is, who we are, and how we can live in right relationship with God. It teaches us how we can love God with all of our heart and soul and strength. How will we know how to live unless we open it, read it and study it?

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist societies in England 250 years ago, once said about the Bible, “O give me that book! At any price give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book.”

Now Wesley read many books. He was a brilliant man. Yet by far the most important book for him was the Bible. We have Sunday School classes every Sunday for children and adults that study the Bible.

God also expects us to worship him. Bishop Will Willimon writes, “So you come to your church on Sunday. You gather with your brothers and sisters in Christ. You

gather to sing, to pray, to eat bread, drink wine, hear the Word read and preached. Why do you do it? You do it for inspiration, for a time of rest, a time of insight. You do it because without it you might forget who you are as one of God's own. You do it because, without Sunday and its meetings, you feel you might not make it through the week. You do it because the service of worship motivates you for service in the world. You do it because the sermon helps you think about things in a new way. All these things happen to you, from time to time, in worship. All these are reasons why you come.

“Mostly you come to worship because you are in love. You are in love because you have been loved. You have been loved by this God whose Son has claimed you. You have been loved by this church that has named you. That's why you are here – to respond to that love, to acknowledge its work in your life, and above all, to enjoy it.”

(The Way, p. 68) God loves us. We love God, so we come to worship.

I remember the worship service at Hampstead United Methodist Church on the Sunday after Hurricane Fran slammed ashore. There was no electricity and no running water. In early September, it was warm and humid in the sanctuary. It was like worshipping at a campground. Nobody had had a shower for several days. When people would arrive, we would hug them and express, “Thank God you are okay!” I have this vivid picture of a young woman named Jan Townsend seated near the front row of chairs. Her infant daughter was in a stroller and her toddler was seated next to her.

It was a different kind of service, but it was such a powerful service. Those people gathered that Sunday because they loved God, and they loved each other. Their covenant with God and with each other was very important.

Another expectation of God and another part of our covenant of membership is to give financially. I fully believe that God expects his people to tithe – to give 10% of our income to God’s work in the world. If I love God with all of my heart and soul and strength, then I will tithe and give sacrificially to God’s work in the world.

Our 2005 ministry budget is \$725,000. \$55,000 of that comes from endowment support. That leaves \$670,000 that comes this way. (Lift up offering plate.)

That large figure is difficult to comprehend. When my brother, Glen, and I were young, we had a tree house in the backyard. One of the things that we kept in our treehouse was a picture of a \$100,000 bill. We cut it out of *The Charlotte Observer*, and put it in our treehouse because we thought it was cool. I still remember that President Woodrow Wilson’s picture was on the \$100,000 bill. We could not comprehend how much money \$100,000 was. We just knew that it was an awful lot.

\$670,000 a year is hard to comprehend, so I’ll put it this way. The ministries that our church is seeking to accomplish this year requires a little over \$1,800 every day.

We have many exciting ministries planned for next year. The amount you pledge to God’s work through our church on Consecration Sunday, October 9, will directly impact what we are able to do.

Another expectation of the Lord and of our membership covenant is service. The apostle Peter writes, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.” (I Peter 4:10)

One service area of our church that was quite active recently was our Missions Committee and others. We learned about ten days ago that the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation had pledged \$5,000 through our congregation for health kits and flood

buckets for Hurricane Katrina victims. The Missions Committee went to work. Last Friday and Saturday people purchased all of the needed supplies. Last weekend people worked to prepare 250 health kits and 35 flood buckets. Other folks brought in additional health kits. By last Tuesday afternoon volunteers had delivered those supplies to a collection point in Durham for delivery to the MERCI Center in Goldsboro and then to Mississippi and Louisiana. What a great job! I thank the Lord for everyone who helped in this effort.

During World War II, England needed to increase its production of coal. Prime Minister Winston Churchill called together labor leaders to enlist their support. At the end of his presentation he asked them to picture in their minds a parade which he knew would be held in Picadilly Circus after the war.

First he said, would come the sailors who had kept the vital sea lanes open. Then would come the soldiers who had come home from Dunkirk and then gone on to defeat General Rommel in Africa. Then would come the pilots who had driven the Luftwaffe from the skies above London. Last of all, he said, would come a long line of sweat-stained, soot-streaked men in miner's caps. Someone would cry from the crowd, "And where were you during the critical days of our struggle?" And from 10,000 throats would come the answer, "We were deep in the earth with our faces to the coal."

Not all the jobs in a church are prominent and glamorous. But it is often the people with their "faces to the coal" who help the church accomplish its mission.

If I love God with all of my heart, soul and strength, then I will serve God. At our church it might be teaching a children's Sunday School class, or visiting sick or homebound members, or singing in the choir. It might be serving as a Stephen Minister,

or as an acolyte or crucifer, or passing out food at the food pantry at Urban Ministries of Durham. It might be cleaning up after Soul Café on Wednesday nights or answering the telephone and helping to prepare a mailing in the church office. There are so many different ways to serve.

Think about how much God loves us. God has given us all that we have. God has blessed us in so many ways. God gave His only Son, Jesus Christ, who died on the Cross for us. How can we not serve him?

We express our love for God by being in covenant with him and with one another – through our prayers, our study and worship, our financial offerings, and our service.

In our hymnal there is a wonderful liturgy by which we can reaffirm our covenant with God and with one another. I invite all of those who have been baptized to participate in this. You will find it on page 50 in your hymnal.