**Back to Basics: Our Baptismal Vows**

**2 Corinthians 5:17-20a**

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A lot of times when the subject comes up, people are surprised that my own child, a pastor’s kid, wasn’t baptized until she was ten-years-old.  There are a lot of reasons it happened that way. We were living in Switzerland when Em was born, and we weren’t regular church-goers. By the time we moved back and built a relationship with a church community, I felt like Em was old enough to have a say about when she would be baptized.  Periodically, we would talk about it and Em would say, “I don’t think I’m ready yet”. Until finally, just before I finished seminary, it was the right time.

 Now, I’m not telling you that story because I think people should wait to have their children baptized - not at all!  Any age is an appropriate age for baptism as long as either the parents or the person understand what is happening, what baptism is all about.  I will say, though, that I’ve always been a little envious of Em because she remembers that day, remembers answering the questions asked by our pastor, remembers being gently dipped into a tub of water, remembers feeling that somehow God was there and something had changed.

 I don’t remember my baptism at all.  If you’ve been baptized, do you? If you don’t or if you haven’t been baptized, that means we have to figure out at some point on our journeys what baptism means - what it means about God and what it means about our lives as people who follow Christ.  For the last couple of weeks, we have been talking about getting back to the basics of our faith, and baptism is one of those. We have only two sacraments - baptism and communion.

 When we talk about a sacrament, we understand it as something God is doing and we’re responding to. In baptism, God is offering us God’s absolute love and grace and an opportunity to live our lives in right relationship with God within a community of believers.  When Jesus is talking with Nicodemus, he says we cannot see the kingdom of God, God’s vision of a just and peaceful world, without being born of water and the Spirit. Without the cleansing and renewal that come with baptism.

Oftentimes, our sins, the things we do that stand between us and God, keep us focused on ourselves - our wants, our desires, and our greed.  The covenant of baptism is God’s promise to love us anyway, always be ready to forgive us so we can start anew, always be working toward a world in which all of God’s people are whole and healthy.  Our part of the covenant is to accept God’s love and forgiveness and promise to spend our time, our energy, our resources, our lives, living out God’s vision for the world. Baptism is not only a sort of rebirth; it is a welcome into community and a call to action.  We believe that through baptism, everyone is called into some kind of ministry.

Of course, our parents take the vows of baptism for us if we are too young to understand them, and they promise to live lives that teach us what it means to follow Christ.  Then, we take them for ourselves when we become members of the church. We renew those vows every time we participate in a baptism or the welcoming of new members. We hear the words as the questions are asked.  We make our promise to renew our commitment and to support those who are new to our church family. But, how much attention do we really pay to what the words say? The language sounds archaic, but if you consider what they say, our calling as Christ-followers becomes very clear.  Not only clear, but also scary and exciting!

 So, let’s take a look. The first question, the first vow, says, “Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?”  Talking about the spiritual forces of wickedness and evil powers of the world might sound like an Avengers movie, but I think we all know that there are forces in our world that seek to increase their own power and wealth at the cost of some of God’s children.  Companies that care more about their profit than how their products might damage the environment, animals, or humanity.

Governments that keep control through fear and violence. Individuals who promote an agenda of hate through fear-mongering and threats. To repent of our sins is to repent from ways in which we have supported or participated with them - interfering with our health and wholeness or the health and wholeness of someone else.  However, God asks not only that we don’t participate but also that we stand up against destruction and oppression.

 That is in the second vow.   Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?  Wow - there it is right there. Our calling as followers of Jesus is a calling to resistance. This isn’t just at a personal level -saying we promise to resist evil, injustice and oppression within ourselves and our own lives.  This calls us to stand up and take action in the face of evil, injustice, and oppression just as Jesus did.

 Which is why, perhaps, the third vow is this: Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?  Resisting evil, injustice, and oppression can be frightening and hard.  We need our faith in Jesus and the community of others to keep going. In the early church, when Christians were regularly persecuted, they identified each other using the phrase, “Jesus is Lord”.  It meant that their commitment to following what Jesus taught, to living a life of love, was their first priority. They believed in him, his teachings, and the promise of God’s reign, and they would put those things before any other commitment - to family, to country, to emperor.  That is what this vow asks of us.

 Those are the questions that ask us to profess our faith and promise to live our faith in the world.  To live as people who want health and wholeness for everyone in the world. To live as people who will screw up our courage and stand up to those who hurt, use or abuse others.

 The last question we’ll talk about is our promise of faithfulness to the church - not just this church but to the whole body of Christ, the community of people around the world who are trying to live with the same love, compassion, and courage that Jesus did.  It says, According to the grace given to you, will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? Our calling is to be the hands of Christ in the world and to keep working at it even when it gets hard.

 These vows are not easy to follow up on.  They ask a lot of us. And, we probably all mess up on at least one of them almost every day.  And that’s okay. That is the blessing of grace, the blessing of our Wesleyan theology that says God doesn’t ask us to be perfect immediately, God asks us to continue working toward perfection.  To recognize when we have gotten off the path, done something selfish or destructive, acknowledge it, ask forgiveness, and then try again.

 Which is why we have as part of our United Methodist liturgy a service of Reaffirmation of Baptism.  Earlier this week, we hosted Sister Helen Prejean here in our sanctuary. If you don’t recognize her name, you might recognize the title of her first book, “Dead Man Walking”, which is about her journey as an opponent to the death penalty.  When she spoke Wednesday night, she talked about her awakening - her realization that faith is about more than obedience or prayer or contemplation. Faith is also about justice. At age 42, she completely changed the direction of her ministry.  Where once she had been the director of novices, helping young women learn what a spiritual life in Christ looks like, she left that and went to live among the poorest of the poor in New Orleans. She allowed the African Americans there to teach her what they needed, what it meant to live the lives of people who are poor and oppressed, and she dedicated her life to serving them for ever after.

 Today, I’m inviting you to open yourself to an awakening or to recommit yourself to the vows you made at your baptism or your membership.  And if you’ve never been baptized, I invite you to consider this might be the point in your life when you’re ready to do that and come talk to me if you decide that it is.

 We all have a longing to make a difference in the world.  Many of us see things happening in our own community, our country, and our world that we believe are wrong.  Things those are destructive rather than constructive of God’s kingdom on earth. We will be called to different passions, different concerns, different people and places that need our love and concern.  Reaffirming our baptism vows is a way to listen to where God is calling us and to recommit ourselves to actively living our faith in the world.

 In your bulletin, there is a short litany in which you are asked to reaffirm your baptism vows.  In a moment, I will say a prayer over this water - water which has been God’s symbol of creation and renewal throughout time.  Then, I will ask you these questions. Afterward, we will sing… As we sing, you are invited to come to one of the bowls of water, dip your hand in, touch your wet hand to your head or your heart, or simply let the water flow from one hand to the other.  As you do, say a prayer of commitment to let God use you - your gifts, your strengths, your wealth, your courage - to further God’s kingdom of love and justice.

 May it be so. Amen.