

The Vows We Take: Renounce, Reject, Repent!

Luke 19:1-10

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After worship recently, I had a conversation with a frequent visitor to our church, and she was sharing with me her dismay about some of what is happening in our country and in our world right now. We talked about immigrants and migrants being deported, the cuts to the social safety net, the war in Gaza, and many other things. At one point, she said to me, “We need a revival of the church to counter the violence and hate that seem to be everywhere”.

That’s something I’ve been thinking about a lot lately. At its best, the Church has served as a prophetic voice pointing out when humanity is straying away from God and succumbing to the temptations of evil. Yet, as membership in churches continues to decline, the Church has lost the powerful voice it once had. How might we reclaim that voice, individually and as a community? How might the Church revitalize its commitment to being the living example of God’s kin-dom values? How might each of us revitalize our faith to find the courage and endurance we need to counter the cruelty, dishonesty, and oppression which seem to be gaining momentum both here in the U.S. and in pockets around the world?

In conversations about revitalizing the church, a lot of people imagine returning to the church of the 1950’s when every pew was full and every Sunday School classroom overflowing. And that would be marvelous to see! Yet, I would like to see us look not back to the church of the 20th century but back to the church of the 1st century. To reclaim the church that emerged from the teachings and ministry of Jesus. To have the same assurance of our identity as Christ-followers as those early Christians did and to be united in our purpose as they were.

That’s why we are going to spend some time this fall rediscovering what it means to be a disciple, what it means to be baptized and to be a member of the church. We are going to explore each of our baptismal vows, examining the sometimes-archaic language to find what they mean and where they came from. We’ll struggle through some of the archaic wording, words first used in the early church, so we can understand how these vows apply to our lives today as we live in a messy, conflicted, and often hurtful world.

In the United Methodist Church, we have just two sacraments - baptism and Holy Communion. These are the two acts that Jesus directly instructed his followers to do. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus says, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” And in Luke 22, we read about the first Holy Communion in which Jesus instructs his disciples, “Do this in remembrance of me.”

When we talk about the sacraments, we usually discuss their theological meaning. It was in the 4th century that theologians began to define the word sacrament as “an outward sign of an inward spiritual grace”, which is still the definition we learn in seminary today. The sacraments are rites through which we encounter God and God’s grace. In baptism, we also take vows of loyalty to Christ and to the Church and then we are welcomed into the family of God and into membership in Christ’s church.

Interestingly, that is where the word “sacrament” comes from. According to Dr. Alan Streett in his book *Caesar and the Sacrament: Baptism A Rite of Resistance*, originally the word “sacramentum” was a legal term that referred to a sort of deposit that each side in a dispute had to pay before the judge would hear their case. Then, Julius Caesar co-opted the word to refer to the oath of fidelity that soldiers took when they joined the Roman army.

When Caesar Augustus became the Roman Emperor, he claimed the title “Son of God”, insisting that his was divine rule. Augustus expected absolute loyalty not just from the army but from all the people. Street says that was when a sort of imperial cult, cult of the emperor, began. He writes, “At the time of Jesus, the imperial cult permeated every facet of Roman life and culture. Public events became opportunities to pay homage to the religion of the state. Special days were set aside to honor imperial Rome and its leaders...Banquets were eaten in Caesar’s name where people expressed piety and devotion and renewed their commitment to the emperor and to Rome.” Subjects of the empire were routinely pressured to say “Caesar is Lord” to prove their loyalty. Allegiance to anyone else led to persecution or even death.

The Romans kept control of their empire through fear and domination. They formed alliances with the native rulers who served as client kings, governors, military officers, and tax merchants who enforced Roman law and punished those who defied it. In Palestine, many of these were leaders in the temple which, Street writes, “was the dominant political-economic institution in Judean society”. Meanwhile, the vast majority of people lived in abject poverty, kept at the edge of starvation by the exorbitant taxes charged by both the Romans and the temple officials.

This is the setting into which Jesus brought his message of love and justice. This is the setting in which the Christian church was born. So, when early Christians took their baptismal vows and promised their loyalty to Christ and to the Church, it was not just agreeing to follow the teachings of Jesus, it was an act of political resistance.

We can see that when we look at the first vow. “On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you: Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?” Now, that language might sound strange and uncomfortable - like something out of Harry Potter. But, when you consider the context in which these questions were asked, you realize that these early Christians were taking real risks. In their eyes, the Roman Empire was the evil power in the world. The motivations and actions of the Empire were wicked. For the sake of power and wealth, they crucified people, left them to be slaughtered by lions, starved them, and impoverished them. Spiritual forces like greed and arrogance inflated the Empire; cruelty and oppression were their results. To renounce those forces and to reject the Empire took incredible courage.

When these people being baptized answered these questions, they were also asked to consider how they had been complicit in wickedness and evil. Because that is what sin is. Sin is whatever undermines or desecrates God’s work of goodness, abundance, and love in the world. Sin is what we do that comes between us and God. To “repent” literally means to turn away from, so the candidates for baptism would physically turn around at this point to embody their vow to turn away from sinful behavior.

Renounce, reject, and repent are powerful words, and we see them at work in the story of Zaccheus. Zaccheus was one of those local leaders that the Romans made alliances with. It was his job to go around and collect the outrageous taxes that kept the poor in perpetual poverty. He was paid well for his effort and so he was one in the small population of people who were wealthy in Judea. Tax collectors were, for obvious reasons, hated by the local people. So, they were appalled when Jesus invited himself to stay at Zaccheus' house. "He's gone to be the guest of a sinner," they cried. Yet, it was in that moment, that Zaccheus understood what Jesus was all about, and with that, he renounced, rejected and repented. He promised to give away half of what he had earned by participating in the tax scheme of the Romans and temple officials. He promised to make right any way in which he had cheated someone. He was renouncing greed, rejecting the evil perpetuated by the Empire, and repenting for his own complicity making the wealthy wealthier and the poor poorer.

When we are baptized or bring a child for baptism, and then again when we are confirmed, and then again if we become members of a different church, we are asked these questions. Hearing the questions and answering them over and over again in our lifetimes is a good and helpful thing. Because if we are intentional about our faith, then every time we are asked and answer the questions in this first baptismal vow, we stop and we look at where there is evil and wickedness in our world and then renounce and reject it. And, we look at our own lives and ask, "how am I participating in this evil" and turn away from those behaviors.

Perhaps you can see why I think this is a particularly good time for us to rediscover these vows. A lot of us feel like the woman who spoke to me after church. We see things happening in our country and world that just feel wrong, cruel, immoral, and we begin to despair. We need some kind of firm foundation, something to ground ourselves in, something to inspire us and keep us believing there is good in the world, and that is what our faith gives us while the vows of our baptism, which then become the vows of church membership, guide us in not just what to believe but in what to do. And they unite us in doing those things together. That is what church is - a community of people who come together to reject what is evil and try to embody the values of the kingdom of God.

May we be so. Amen.