

## **The Vows We Take: Freedom and Power to Resist!**

### **Mark 11:15-18**

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These days, it seems as though every week is filled with news that points to a country in the midst of upheaval, and this week was no exception. On Wednesday, the shooting of a conservative activist was followed less than an hour later by the 47th school shooting we've had in the U.S. this year. The next day was the anniversary of 9-11 - a day that once drew us together as a country in grief but this year was just the backdrop to more hate-filled and polarizing political rhetoric. As conservatives laid the blame for the assassination on liberals, at least six historically black colleges and universities received credible threats as did our own Michigan lieutenant governor. And then Friday we learned that a 22-year-old white, conservative man had turned himself in for the political shooting, apparently because he felt the conservative activist wasn't conservative enough.

It was a week in which we were brought face to face, over and over again, with the complex nature of evil and our responses to it. How ironic that it is also the week I had already planned to preach on the second of our baptismal vows - "Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?"

We started this sermon series last week as a way of rediscovering who we are and who we are called to be as followers of Christ. Our baptismal vows come from the very early Church - the first Christians took these vows as they became part of the Jesus movement. Their context was the Roman Empire, where Judeans lived in fear of the oppressive power of the emperor and those who worked for him. In the vows, there has always been a renunciation of wickedness and a promise to resist evil before professing faith and loyalty to Jesus. That renunciation of evil is scriptural. In Romans 12:9, Paul teaches us to "love unambiguously, hating the evil, holding fast to the truth." In the book of Amos, we read "Hate evil; love good."

The phrase "resist evil, injustice, and oppression" can sound strange to our 21st ears. The word "evil" has fallen out of favor when we talk about the ills of society, relegated to describing superheroes in comic books and movies. We're not very comfortable with the idea of human evil, which is, perhaps, why we shy away from naming it when we see it and when we hear it. But, how can we resist it if we don't name it? And how can we name it if we don't wrestle with the question of what evil actually is?

The most common dictionary definition I found for "evil" as an adjective was "profoundly immoral" or "morally reprehensible". As a noun, evil is "the fact of suffering, misfortune, and wrongdoing" or "something that brings sorrow, distress, or calamity". Definitions like these leave much to interpretation, which is how both sides in our polarized society are able to use the word in describing the other.

What is significant for us, though, is what evil means biblically. Professor Ingrid Faro writes that as in common usage, evil in the Bible has a broad range of meanings, but its definition can be summarized in saying evil is "the corruption of relational and creational goodness". "Evil

consists of thoughts, actions, or forces that diminish life,” she writes. “Evil takes what God planned for the good of all his creation and distorts or defiles it...bringing chaos, distress, cursing, and death. Evil is anything that departs from God’s good intentions in creation, breaks our relationship with God and our neighbor, or tries to take what does not belong to it.”

By this definition, all of these events from this week were evil. There is nothing of God in taking another life, in sixteen-year-olds shooting their peers and in language that foments hate and violence.

These are evil actions. Yet, the real spiritual evil is what motivates the actions - greed, lust for power, and hunger for vengeance.

How do we resist something so widespread and so pervasive? Our baptismal vow suggests that we begin by recognizing and resisting whatever is unjust or oppressive. Throughout the gospels, Jesus gives us examples of this like when he flips the tables of the merchants and money changers in the temple. He does so because he believes the whole system of buying, selling, and changing money in the temple cheats the poor. They are forced to exchange their own money for temple currency, inevitably at a loss and the merchants overcharge them for the animals the law requires them to sacrifice. Injustice like this doesn’t belong in his father’s house.

Similarly, Jesus breaks one of the Jewish laws when he heals on the Sabbath, stating that the health and wholeness of one of God’s children is more important than strict adherence to the law. Jesus doesn’t just stand up to particular acts of evil but to the systems of power that enable those acts to happen. The legal system, the political system, and even the religious system. In all cases, Jesus prioritizes life and love, and through his grace, frees us to do the same.

God has already given us the freedom and power to resist. The question is whether we accept that freedom and power. Will we take the risks inherent in speaking truth to power? The vow to resist evil, injustice, and oppression has two sides or two faces. Both require us to have courage and to trust in God’s grace. The first is to actively oppose them when we see them happening. Will we speak out? Stand up? Advocate? Decry?

The second is to look within our own hearts, at our own thoughts and actions. This vow asks us if we will resist the temptation within ourselves to participate in evil, injustice, or oppression. Will we choose what is life-giving and life-affirming rather than responding to hate with hate and violence with violence?

In the face of the evil we see and hear, the evil inflicted on us and people we love, many of our hearts are filled with rage and fear and disbelief and heartbreak. It is deeply disturbing to hear someone in a position of power and influence calling for the death of people he sees as lesser, and using language that is hateful rather than loving to so many of our neighbors. All of us know people, or perhaps are people, who are suffering from the rhetoric of hate against immigrants, women, LGB and trans folks, liberals, and, of course, black and brown people.

We recognize this is the very kind of evil, injustice, and oppression that we are called to resist, that we promise to resist, when we are baptized and each time we become church members. But, it is so tempting to lash out - to meet evil with evil, to add our voices to the hate-filled,

polarizing rhetoric, to feed our own anger and fear by only reading social media that supports what we think, to justify doing evil because evil has been done to us.

At some level, we know that this will only exacerbate the whole situation. So, what then do we do? How do we take all this emotion and channel it into positive resistance? First of all, we dig deeply into our faith. We study who Jesus was, what he said and what he did. We learn the context he lived in and what his words meant within that context. We examine how he confronted power - the language he used, when he spoke, when he was silent and let the words of the powerful condemn themselves. We consider how he expressed love, asking what it means to follow his new commandment - that we love each other as he loves us.

And we learn from those who have gone before us. We look at the examples of the early church. How did they build community and support each other in living counter-culturally? What did the apostle Paul teach them about how to put Jesus' teachings into practice?

We look at examples of people of faith who have successfully challenged systems of power non-violently and we learn from them.

And we look to our own heritage as United Methodists. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, taught that there is no holiness without social holiness. Methodists at the time advocated for prison reform, called for the abolishment of slavery, provided food and housing and education to children living on the streets, and spoke out against child labor.

When Methodism came to this side of the Atlantic, American Methodists took up those and other causes fully believing that helping to build a just society was an act of faith, a calling from God. Still today, as a denomination, we have a book of Social Principles, which "call United Methodists to direct action to resist evil, whether that be by boycotts, by witnessing against irresponsible use of the earth and its resources, or against war as a normal instrument of national policy, or against racism, or against capital punishment, or for workers' rights, and the list goes on (and on and on)."

We learn what the social principles are and we look for opportunities to express our faith by actively participating in what is good and just. We don't just profess our beliefs. We actively dismantle systems built on greed, power, and vengeance.

Above all, we remember that the very cornerstone of our faith, of who we are, is love. We resist evil, injustice, and oppression because that is what it means to love. As Christ-followers, we believe that love is stronger than hate, that God's love overcomes all evil in the end, and we hold on to God's promises, placing our hope in the slow but steady unfolding of the reign of God.

May it be so. Amen.