

The Vows We Take: Confess, Trust and Serve

Matthew 14:22-33

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As we get started, I have a question for you. How many of you remember your baptism? If you were a baby, you probably don't have any memory of it at all, but I was surprised when I was talking with a couple of people after church recently that both of them had very clear memories of when they were baptized. If you do remember it, what do you remember? The warmth of family gathered around you? The feel of the pastor gently placing cool water on your head? Or maybe a dunk into a tub or even river? Was it scary? Confusing? Did you have a sense of something spiritual or sacred in those moments?

Now, here's a similar question. Do you remember when you were confirmed? When infants are baptized, their grown ups take the vows for them, promising to raise them in the faith until they reach an age when they are ready to take the vows for themselves. That is what happens at Confirmation. You take the vows and take responsibility for your own faith journey. At the same time, you become a voting member of the congregation, able to participate in the decision-making of the community. So, when you were confirmed, did you understand the questions you were being asked? Did you know what you were committing to?

I'll be honest. I had no idea. I understood I was becoming a member of the church, and that was about it. In fact, I didn't pay any attention to the vows of baptism and membership until I was in seminary. Yet, I find that as the years pass, I continue to have a deeper understanding and appreciation for what they mean and how they shape my life.

That's part of why I am doing this sermon series. I want to help others who haven't really thought about them to recognize how powerful they are - and how challenging. The vows were first developed in the early church, and their context, living in the oppressive Roman Empire, is key to understanding them and to giving them meaning for us today.

Unfortunately, over time, much of the theological meaning of baptism was lost, not just in the Methodist tradition but in many Christian denominations. Gayle Carlton Felton, author of *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* writes, "As a result, infant baptism was variously interpreted and often reduced to a ceremony of dedication. Adult baptism was sometimes interpreted as a profession of faith and public acknowledgment of God's grace, but was more often viewed simply as an act of joining the Church. By the middle of the twentieth century, Methodism in general had ceased to understand baptism as authentically sacramental. Rather than an act of divine grace, it was seen as an expression of human choice." Since then, there has been an ecumenical movement to reclaim the meaning of baptism as it was understood in the early church. To do that, we have to spend time with these vows and consider what they are asking of us, remembering that our journey with God is a journey of transformation.

Over the last two weeks, we've looked at the first two vows - each of which addresses how we are called to interact with the world around us - particularly those powers and principalities that are destructive of the life God created us to live - a life of compassion,

wholeness, and hope. They are promises we make to turn away from the temptation of power, greed, cruelty and selfishness and to stand up to these evils in the world, to resist them.

Our third vow is quite different. This one is more personal - less about our responses to the outside world and more about God's work transforming us from the inside out. It gets at the heart of what it is to be Christian and what differentiates Christianity from other faith traditions. Over my years of doing baptisms and membership classes, this is the vow I've been asked the most questions about and the one people are most hesitant about. "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?" Like Peter as he climbs out of the boat and first places one foot on the surface of the water, this vow asks us to have faith, to trust in Jesus and in the power of God's love to transform our lives. It's a vow in three parts, and it is full of theological words that are key to understanding our faith.

So, let's take it one part at a time. "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior?" If you have ever watched a televangelist, been to a Christian youth rally, or spent much time around traditional evangelicals, you have probably been asked, "Are you saved?" And for a lot of us, it's an uncomfortable question. It feels too intimate to be asked by a stranger, and it often seems to be accompanied by accusation, judgement, and threats. When I hear those words, my mind goes to fire and brimstone preaching, and the heavily sin-based theology of preachers like Jonathon Edwards, best remembered for his sermon, "Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God".

After all, that is what they are asking if you've been saved from - your sins. Another uncomfortable word - one that a lot of mainline Christians have all but stopped using except in the Lord's Prayer. We find it hard to say "I am a sinner" because we don't consider ourselves to be the evil, awful people that sin-based theology tells us we are.

So, let's see if we can rescue the word "sin" from such heavy-handed condemnation because, in reality, we are all sinners. Sin is anything we do that comes between us and God, that leads us on a path away from God's path of compassion, justice, and unconditional love, or that is destructive to ourselves or others. And let's face it - all of us have uncharitable thoughts, do hurtful things, say words we regret. Because we are human! Of course we sin! We're not meant to be perfect yet!

And that is what is so beautiful about United Methodist theology. We don't view salvation as one and done. We don't believe that once you are baptized or once you enter into a relationship with Jesus, that's it. You're good to go no matter what you do. Rather, for John Wesley, the father of Methodism, salvation was a process, a process to restore the image of God in us as we become more like Jesus, perfect in love, and that takes a lifetime. To confess Jesus Christ as our savior is to say that we have faith that in his life and teachings, and in his death and resurrection, God has created a path for us - a path of forgiveness, reconciliation, and transformation.

But we can't do that on our own, which is the meaning behind the second part of the vow - do you put your whole trust in his grace? Whatever we do to be more like Jesus we can only do because of God's grace. Grace is God's unconditional love for us. We can't earn it. It is just always there. That said, we aren't just passive recipients either. God does not do God's work of transformation in us without our consent and participation. We have to accept God's grace and respond to it. Trusting in God's grace means we trust that because God loves us so absolutely, we

can start over again and again. We can be forgiven and forgive ourselves. We can become better people, more fully reflecting the image of God. More loving, more compassionate.

God does God's work through the Holy Spirit. When we wander off God's path, it is the Holy Spirit that calls us back. It is the Spirit that nudges us toward peace-making when we're inclined to fight. It is the Spirit that inspires us to grow and learn and trust in God. It is the Spirit that fills our hearts with love and moves us to serve others with compassion. It is the Spirit that gives us the courage to walk on water.

Which brings us to the third part of the baptism vow. We can only keep our promise to serve Jesus as our Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit. To serve Jesus as our Lord is to put Jesus and what he asks of us before any other ruler or powerful person or entity. In the early church, to say Jesus is Lord could be very dangerous. You were supposed to say Caesar is Lord, pledging yourself to the empire rather than to God. Yet, we are called to serve Jesus, to live a life of love and justice, to help others find peace in that life.

To be counter-cultural in this way, to choose to swim against the current, is hard, really hard, and that is why we do it in union with the Church. Christ's church, open to all people, is where we find like-minded friends who are also trying to be people of love and hope and justice. Friends who understand how difficult it is and will not judge. Friends who will lift us up and guide us back to the path when we stray. And friends who will work alongside us as we try to do our part in growing God's kin-dom.

So, there you have it. There's a lot packed into that vow! No wonder many of us don't remember it. That's why we repeat it with every baptism and with every joining of new members. As with all liturgy, each time we hear it, the words sink more deeply into our hearts. We hear them differently at different ages and stages of our lives. Their meaning deepens as society changes and we have to find faithful ways to respond. Yet, they are core to our faith. God loves you absolutely. Because God loves you, God forgives your mistakes. Because God forgives your mistakes, you are free to grow in faith and love. And because you are free to grow in faith and love, you become part of transforming the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.