

"Persevering"

**"I WILL,
WITH GOD'S
HELP."**

"Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"

I will, with God's help."

This is the second of a five-part Sermon series that I am preaching this Lent on our Baptismal Covenant, a covenant that we all renew every Easter, and at every baptism, and on various other occasions. This Covenant represents our response to God's call to us, and this sermon series focuses on what exactly we promise at our Baptism, and what it means to be a Christian, and what we are called upon to do as such.

Last week I spoke about the first promise we make with our baptismal vows, that with God's help, we will continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers. Last week we saw that this was a promise to stay in fellowship with one another, in community, to be active in the Church, the very place where we participate in the apostles'

teaching and fellowship, where we break bread together at Eucharist, and share our hopes and concerns with one another in prayer. As I noted last week, we are never solitary Christians. Our faith is *not* some private matter between God and us, or simply some kind of personal and private choice we make. We are by Baptism made part of the Body of Christ, and one part of the body, as St. Paul reminds us, cannot say to another that we have no need of you.

But sadly, we do often say that. Sadly, we do often say to others that we have no need of you. We do often break up the Body of Christ into familiar pieces, into our private ghettos and gated communities, forming our own individual cliques, where we feel safe and comfortable, separating each other by social standing, by race, by class, by education, or by political persuasions. We do often then shame, blame and criticize those that are not part of our clique, cementing the divisions between us as a result, caring more then for this group or that one, fragmenting the Body of Christ. If the Mission of the Church is indeed the reconciliation of all people to each other and to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, then these divisions run counter to God's will. This is not what God wants for us. And thus, I dare say, that these divisions amongst us are evil.

Jesus, I believe, led the way in breaking down barriers that divide us. Much to the shock of others in his day, he ate

with sinners and tax collectors. He talked alone with the Samaritan women at the well, shocking even his own disciples. He told an infamous parable where a despised Samaritan was the 'good' guy and hero in the story, and not the respected priest or Levite. He healed the daughter of a foreigner, a Syro-Phoenician woman, and the slave of a Roman centurion, the military occupiers of his homeland. Jesus allowed a notorious sinner to publicly wash his feet at the house of a prominent Pharisee. He criticized the Temple authorities for turning God's house of prayer for all people into a marketplace, and a den of thieves. He forgave the woman caught in adultery and embraced lepers, contrary to the Law of Moses. He healed the sick and spoke with authority, not like the scribes. Oh, Jesus did indeed break down many social barriers in his day.

And the early Church continued this ministry after his death. Those first Christians did what Jesus did. They witnessed first to the crowd of foreigners who came to Jerusalem at Pentecost. Peter and John were arrested repeatedly by the religious authorities, but still refused to stop preaching in the Temple square. Stephen the Deacon, a former slave, confronted the Sanhedrin, and those religious leaders stoned him to death outside the gates of the city. This led to a widespread persecution of Jesus' followers, causing many to spread out from Jerusalem and continue their mission in Judea, Samaria, Galilee

and beyond. Young Saul dragged many of Jesus' followers out of their houses and brought them back to Jerusalem in chains. The Apostle Philip started a congregation in Samaria, then Caesarea, then Syria, Phrygia and Greece. The Apostle Peter daringly baptized Cornelius a Roman Centurion and then welcomed him into the Christian fellowship. In Antioch, where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, Barnabas received Gentiles into their midst, the uncircumcised as the bounds of the community expanded. Soon the converted Paul joined Barnabas there, and together they established multiple congregations in Asia Minor and in Greece. The early Church also famously cared for those who had no one to care for them, the orphans and widows, the marginalized and the foreigner in the land. They ordained Deacons to wait on the tables where Jews and Gentiles ate together. Like Jesus, these early followers healed the sick and cared for the poor. And in the end, they transformed the Roman Empire.

Over the centuries, the Church has again and again sought unity where they perceived division and inequality in their societies, and sought reform where they perceived cruelty or injustice. Oh, yes, they also fell short again and again, and the struggle continues. In the nineteenth century, for example, Christians led the fight to improve prison conditions. They passed laws to protect children in the labor force, they

abolished slavery, built shelters for the homeless and working institutes to train and educate the poor. They established Missions in far off places around the world, uniting peoples of many races, nations, cultures and tongues into one Body. In our own century, the Church has fought for women's suffrage, for desegregation and civil rights, for women's ordination, fought against mass incarceration, for gay and gender rights, for abolition of the death penalty and for more affordable housing for the poor. This is the same mission, a mission that we are all called upon to continue. In the midst of this devastating pandemic, for example, we have organized to support and protect essential workers, and medical staff. We have attended to those suffering, to care for the sick, to comfort the dying, to feed the hungry, to help the unemployed and destitute, and in the same way, we continue to seek to root out the evil of systemic racism in our society.

It is not easy to persevere in these efforts. It is not easy resisting evil, to fight against injustice, to care for the poor and forgotten ones. It is tiring, hard work. It seems like a never-ending task, and it is. Most of us would prefer instead to retreat back into our own quiet little communities, and forget that we are part of the larger Church, and larger concerns. Enough is enough, we might say. And so the second promise of our Baptismal Covenant acknowledges how hard this

work is, and urges us to persevere, and whenever we fail and fall short of the glory of God, to repent and return to the Lord. The three "R"s: resist, repent, and return. The Christian community, of which we promised to be active with our first vow, is engaged in the long arc of justice as we struggle to reconcile all people to each other and to secure peace across all lands. Our mission of reconciliation is arduous. It is easier to escape to our private ghettos and gated communities. It is easier to avoid difficult conversations and unpleasant tasks. But we are called upon by God in our Baptismal vows to persevere, and when we stumble and fail, to repent and return to the Lord. We can do this, with God's help. AMEN.