

"Respecting the Dignity of All"

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

"Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?"

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This is the last of a five-part sermon series which I have been preaching this Lent on our Baptismal Covenant, a covenant that we as a congregation all renew each Easter and at every Baptism, a covenant which attempts to articulate our relationship with God, and our responsibilities as Christians. It is a covenant, we learned, not a contract. For God remains faithful to his promises, even when we fail and fall short of ours.

The first promise, you will remember, was a call into community --- to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread together at Eucharist and in the sharing with each other of our hopes and concerns in prayer. We are never alone as Christians. Our faith is *not* some

private matter between God and us, or simply a personal 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, though sadly we often do. The early church grew rapidly, we saw, but not because of any organized programs or carefully stated truths or doctrines, for there was in fact great disorder and significant disputes in the early church just as there are now. The early church grew because people saw the quality of the lives of its members changed. Baptism is about transforming the quality of our lives and the lives of those around us, not by ideas so much as by actions. We are, therefore, moved to be active within the Church, within the Christian community, because the Church, the gathering of the faithful, is where we most clearly encounter God and God's people.

The second promise of our baptism informed us as to the nature of this community, that the Church's primary mission is one of reconciliation, the reconciliation of all people to each other and to God through Christ. Over the centuries, the Church has again and again struggled to find unity where division and inequality were perceived, and sought reform where cruelty or injustice were encountered. Oh, yes, the church also fell short again and again, so the struggle continues. It is not easy to fight against injustice. It is not easy to care for the poor and

forgotten ones, and so we have to persevere. 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 gated communities, and forget that we are part of the larger Church, and larger concerns.

The third of our baptismal promises charged us as a community with a ministry to bear witness, to proclaim the faith that is within us by our words and our examples. This third baptismal vow challenges us to examine our values, as we acknowledge that the words we speak and the actions we take, bear true witness most clearly to the values that we hold dearest. In contrast to the world's focus on money, sex and power, we saw that early Christians instead focused on living different lives, emphasizing simplicity, integrity and humility over the years.

The fourth promise of our Baptismal Covenant from last week was perhaps the most familiar. We have all rehearsed the words "love your neighbor as yourself" since our childhood. But the kind of love demanded of us in our fourth Baptismal promise is NOT some kind of warm, fuzzy pious feeling of kindness towards others. We are not called to be 'nice.' Instead love, as we saw, is an action, not a feeling, and we are called upon to act in loving ways to all those in our lives, to our family and

friends, to our neighbors, even unto the stranger and foreigner in our land.

Our last baptismal promise is that, with God's help, we will strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. This is perhaps the most frightening of the baptismal promises, for with this one, there is no place left to hide. For we promise here to strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and not just those in our community of faith, not just those in our little town or village, not just those with whom we identify, those of our tribe or our class or our people. Moreover we promise here to also respect the dignity of every human being, and not just those who agree with us, or who look like us, who speak the same language as we do, or those who share the same values, or who are of the same political or social persuasion. Now we are being called upon as Christians to be open and respectful, to be loving and compassionate, to be vulnerable with everyone, especially those that are different from us, those that disagree with us, those that disappoint us, or distress us, and even those who are our enemies, who may hate us and would crucify us. "You have heard it said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I tell you," says Jesus, "that you shall love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

All the comfortable boundaries of life are gone now as we struggle to bear witness in this promise to God's love and care for the *whole* world, to take the blessings of our lives and our community, and to share them with everyone else there is. Our baptism then not only calls us into the Church, into this loving and forgiving fellowship of believers, but our baptism also sends us out into the world, out into the great and frightening vastness of the unknown and unfamiliar. For we are indeed the Body of Christ in the world; in the words of St. Theresa of Avila, we are the eyes God has to see the world's sorrows and pains, the ears to hear the cries of children and the wails of the brokenhearted, we are the hands God has to reach down to the poor and the outcast, and the heart to love the neglected and forgotten ones. For we are the Body of Christ in the world. What we are talking about here in this promise is the difference between belonging to the Church and being the Church.

Jesus and his disciples modeled this kind of community for us, and great things happened, miraculous things occurred, lives were transformed, people were healed, sinners forgiven, storms stilled, and outcasts welcomed in and loved. But even so, with the reading of the Passion Gospel next Sunday, we will be reminded how fragile this kind of community can be. For next week on Palm Sunday we will hear the same voices that welcome Jesus into Jerusalem with shouts of "Hosanna," shortly

thereafter crying out to 'crucify him.' As the events of that holy week transpire, the community of the faithful disciples of Jesus unravels, their lives are torn apart, their hopes and dreams dissolved. They become filled with dread, they become disillusioned, and hide behind closed doors in fear. They flee from the angry mob in Gethsemane and abandon Jesus. One of them runs away naked. One of them betrays him. One denies even knowing him, three times. One of them hangs himself in despondency, while the others hide in the shadows, overcome by anxiety, and fear, and confusion, and uncertainty.

And this is how it is with us sometimes. Our lives unravel too sometimes; we lose our jobs, our dreams, our health breaks down, our relationships break up. We are overcome with waves of panic and fear and anxiety at times because like the disciples, things do not always go the way we expect them to, the way we want them to, and we get scared and apprehensive, as individuals, as communities, even as a nation.

This happens most often when we are focused on what we want and what we expect, when we are lost in our own personal hopes and dreams. But God must be the focus of our lives as Christians, as individuals and as a congregation. And when God is our focus, when we trust in Him, that He is still present, still active even in the midst of that which confuses us, or distresses us, or scares us, when we trust that God is still

present among us in the midst of our sorrows and our pains: new things are possible, that which has been cast down can be raised up, that which is old can be made new, that which was thought dead will come alive again. That is the story of the Easter, as Jesus gets arrested and is dragged from place to place, is spit upon, flogged, slapped, mocked, tortured, and crucified, that God is still present even in that which appears so blatantly as failure and defeat, even in that which frightens and confuses us. God can turn our failures into victory.

St. Paul writes that if we want to rise to a new life like Christ's, we must also be prepared to die like him, to take up our cross and follow him, even into the midst of the angry mob, even unto Calvary, and then to do as he did, forgiving those that nailed him to the cross and then trusting in God's loving presence completely. We must learn to echo Jesus' words in the mist of our own pain and fears, and say as he did, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." "Thy will be done, not mine." And we will, with God's help, be able to make it so. AMEN