

Proclaim By Word and Deed

**“I WILL,
WITH GOD’S
HELP.”**

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?”

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This is the third sermon in a five part series which I am preaching this Lent on our Baptismal Covenant, a covenant that we all renew each Easter and at every baptism and on various other occasions, and *that* was the third promise we make at our baptism, that we will, with God’s help, proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ. As you may remember, the first promise was a call into community, to be active in the Body of Christ by continuing in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread together at Eucharist and sharing our hopes and concerns with one another in prayer. Last week I spoke about the second of our baptismal promises, which focuses upon the arduous task of our sacred community, to seek the reconciliation of all people to each other and to God

through Christ Jesus our Lord. The third promise charges us as a community with a ministry to witness, to attest to what we believe, and to proclaim the faith that is within us by our words and our examples.

This is perhaps the most problematic of the promises we make at our baptism for most Christians. For many fear that this promise insists that we have to stand out on a street corner or knock upon a neighbor's door and openly witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is our personal Lord and Savior. Most of us would be uncomfortable with that kind of evangelism, with that kind of witnessing. And I am now sure how efficacious it is to approach random strangers and attest to our faith in this way, in what one of my friends called "spiritual assault" or even "spiritual rape," where some people attempt to impose their religious views upon others, whether the others are interested in it or not.

I think the deeper question here in this third promise is what kind of life do our words and actions bear witness to? Do our neighbors, for example, know that we are Christians? Is it obvious? Are our lives any different in appearance than our unchurched friends? It seems to me that this baptismal vow is about the question of values, and acknowledges that the words we speak and the actions we take, bear true witness most clearly to the values that we hold dearest. And what would those be for us?

Is it the Good News of God in Christ? At times, I fear it is not.

The predominant values of the world in which we live, it seems to me, appear to be money, sex, and power, where how much we own, and how good we look, and what we control is most valued in our society. We focus so much on how big our house is, or how new our car is, or what power over others we are exercising? Our manufacturing industry, for example, promotes by design, the newest and latest, in a constantly changing sense of what is in and what is out this season, what is hot and what is not. Clothes are not simply meant to cover our bodies and keep us warm any longer; they are fashion statements about who we are. Labels are important. The reporters ask the actresses on the red carpet before the Academy Awards whose dress they are wearing, because that matters in our world. Food and drink are not meant just to sustain our bodies any longer, but to comfort us and please us and to affirm our status in life, where we pay a lot of attention to what we eat or drink, and where --- and not surprising then, we have an obesity epidemic in this country, just as we also struggle with alcoholism and chemical dependency.

It seems to me, however, that the values of the early Church were just opposite of the values of our culture today. Instead of money, sex, and power, the early Christians promoted

poverty, chastity, and obedience. We are told in the book of Acts that the first Christians sold all that they owned and laid the proceeds at the feet of the apostles, where it was distributed to any who had need. Later Christian communities pooled their resources together to care not for themselves, but for the larger community, especially for those who had no one to care for them, namely widows and orphans. These early Christians also valued purity of life, that is, they were chaste, which meant honoring their vows and their personal relationships. It was not until the 16th century that chastity became synonymous with celibacy. And those early Christians valued obedience, obedience to God, and to Jesus' teaching, to love one's enemies, to turn the other cheek, to lay down one's sword, to care for the poor and needy, to welcome in the stranger and foreigner in the land, and to love our neighbor as our self. But is that what we value today? Is that what our individual words and actions witness to?

Now few Christians I know would readily take up the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience these days. Those are instead vows which somehow in the Middle Ages were transferred to the clergy, and to monks and nuns, the so-called "religious" of that time. In the same way, some today would suggest that the clergy alone should be ones standing on street corners or in pulpits

bearing witness with their words and actions to the Good News of God in Christ.

Nonetheless, many years ago, I remembering preaching on these values in a sermon that sadly now is lost to me. And I remember suggesting that the values of poverty, chastity, and obedience were indeed meant to be values for all Christians. However I sought to recast those vows in more contemporary terms. I proposed instead the formula of simplicity, integrity, and humility as modern-day equivalents of the ancient Christian vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Simplicity, where we purposely try to live simpler lives, so that others can simply live. In a similar way, I suggested that we focus on integrity in our words and actions; that we kept the vows and promises we make, that we honor others and do not seek to shame, blame, or criticize, but to reconcile. I believe that we are called to live out our lives in such a way as to give more of our time and energy in efforts to care for others in our community, than for ourselves. And also to be obedient to our understanding of the Gospel, but always with humility as we try to avoid the self-righteousness of so many religious people.

I have had this discussion about values with my children many times. I raised them all in what I believed was a good Christian home. They attended church regularly and were active in the Sunday School and programs of the Church growing up.

Church was fun for them, they'll admit. They were also well fed and clothed at home, and educated, mostly in private schools, because education was important to me. But *their* values reflect more the values of the world we live in than those of Jesus. They drive nicer cars than I do, for instance, and they were embarrassed by the little economical scooter that I rode about in Bridgeport. They have more clothes than they need, endlessly buying more and more, whatever the latest fashion is, and they seem ashamed by my clothes, by my faded blue jeans and clergy shirts, by my moth eaten sweaters and hand-me-down suits, and by my unfashionable beard and grey hair. It is a question of values, I tell them, of what is important in life. My life is different from theirs, I say, on purpose. And sure enough, they agree and are amused that that Lisa and I tend to clean our own house, wash our own cars, shovel our own snow, mow our own grass, that we grow our own vegetables in the summer, and I make our own wine year round, that Lisa cuts my hair, and we do our own taxes --- that we live simply, so that others can simply live, so that together we are able to give about 18% of our income away to the church and to our favorite charities. We live a different kind of life than my children do. They, on the other hand, have all the latest electronic gadgets, whatever the newest fad may be. They have designer labels on their clothes and expensive food tastes, but they generally give little or no

money, or any of their time, to charity and the needs of the poor. They are too busy with their own lives, and with keeping up their own standard of living to really care for others, especially for the socially unacceptable, especially for those who make them uncomfortable, like the needy, the sick, the dying. They are self-indulgent, I fear. They are like so many others of their generation, and at times, I am embarrassed by them, where sadly their values, their words and actions, are identified almost entirely with the outward and visible signs of wealth and status.

In the Gospels, Jesus suggests a different set of values for his followers, where we are not supposed to be concerned with what we eat or drink, or what we wear, or how much we can stuff into our barns. Jesus suggests a very different set of values, where concern for the needy, for the orphan and the widow, for women and social outcasts, for the sick and the mentally distressed, where *these* concerns are paramount. Jesus tells us to seek ye first the kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Jesus reminds us of the words of the prophet Micah, "God has told you, O mortal, what is good;" wrote the prophet. "And what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" --- If there really is a Cultural War going on in this

country, as so many conservative political pundits declare, then this is it, I believe. It is a question of values.

So which set of values do we represent? Which set of values do our words and our actions bear witness to? The Christian values of simplicity, integrity and humility, or the worldly values of money, sex and power? Because Jesus warns us that we cannot have them both, "No one can serve two masters;" he says, "for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." In the end, there is a clear distinction between the values which Jesus espoused and those of the world.

So which side of the Cultural War are we on? Are we more interested in how much money we can earn, how many possessions we own, or what we eat or the label on our dress --- or are we more concerned about the needs of the poor and this community and our vital ministry of reconciliation?

"Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? I will, with God's help." For one cannot serve God and wealth." So whom then are we really serving? Amen.