

Good morning. Happy Easter!

This morning I am concluding a series of five sermons based on the five questions of holy obligation in our Baptismal Covenant, which we will renew in a few minutes.

Easter morning is a peculiar time to wrap up a series of sermons. This is the morning when we have the most visitors in the entire year. So there is a very good possibility that many of you this morning have not heard any of the previous sermons in this series.

This conundrum is my entire fault. Easter is what we call in the Church, “a moveable feast”. It is never the same date from year to year. But it is not like Easter snuck up on me. I know the formula for determining Easter’s date.

It is written in the Prayer Book on page 880:

Easter Day is always the Sunday after the full moon that occurs on or after the spring equinox on March 21....

If that wasn’t enough specificity, I could simply turn the page to pages 882 and 883 and see a list of the dates for Easter spanning from 1900-2051! By the way, next year Easter is on March 28. Perhaps I will plan better next year!

But in many ways I think the question we will focus on today is the one that best matches the stunning breadth, and depth of our celebration of the Resurrection of our Lord.

Our question this morning is:

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

That is the fifth, and final question of holy obligation that we are asked when we are baptized, or when we renew our baptismal vows. In fact, it is the last of all eight of the questions. In a very real way it is the culmination of our vows, and it directs us to the power of the resurrection.

This question was not without controversy as the House of Bishops began framing the Baptismal Covenant. It was one of the first questions to be considered, but there were those who thought its focus on social justice was merely a nod to a passing fad. But read any newspaper's headlines, and we are likely to see that it was no simple fad.

Instead this question, this vow we take, calls us from a self-centered spirituality, or church-centric identity, into the vision of a world, even a cosmos, redeemed, and made whole by our savior, God made flesh, Jesus Christ.

Consider this: Baptism is the most exclusive rite of the Church. It is the moment that marks who is a member of the Church, and who is not. We confront those who would be baptized, and we ask them if they will believe, and live, like we do. We then perform the rite of Baptism, with sacrament and prayers, and then welcome them into the Body of Christ.

In one moment the candidate is outside the Body. In the next the candidate is a member of the Body. This rite is so exclusive that in the early Church it was done secretly, not publicly. It was offered only after a long period of preparation to make sure those being baptized not only understood what they were doing, but also that they could be trusted. Baptism is the most exclusive rite of the Church.

Yet the stunning scope of the Baptismal Covenant, the vows we take at our baptism, the vows we will renew this morning, is that

this exclusive rite does not in any way call us to superiority. Instead it calls us to humility, and graciousness.

At the moment the Church marks her most exclusive rite we are asked if we will look after every human being, and strive for their safety, and equitable treatment.

The five questions of Baptismal Covenant form a sort of set of concentric circles. First we are asked if we will continue within the community of the Church, whether we will find our place within this holy life.

Next we are asked if we will resist evil, and repent and return when we stumble. We are asked that, as we engage a broken world as redeemed folk, if we will continue to return, and find anew the reality of our redemption.

We are asked if we will take the message of that redemption into the world. We are asked if we will share our faith with others who need the hope we have found in Christ.

From there we are asked if we will seek, and serve all people. We are asked if we will love our neighbor as ourselves. We are asked if we will engage, and treat others with as much grace, and honor as Christ treats us.

Then, as a culmination, our gaze is lifted to the whole scope of humanity. We are asked if we will respect the dignity of every human being. Will we recognize that Christ died for the person in front of us just as surely as Christ died for us. Are we willing to believe the saintly vision of Christ in which he spoke, "Had I not created paradise already, I would create it just for you."? Do those words ring true for every human being?

This morning we celebrate the fullness of life, the reality of unlimited grace. We gather at this moment to find ourselves

always in the love of God. We will respond by renewing our commitment to believe in our God, and to show forth our belief by continuing within the Body of Christ, persevering in a life of repentance, proclaiming our hope, loving our neighbors, and respecting every person as a beloved child of God, even if they do not know that love, or accept it. The fullness of life, the unlimited grace we celebrate today is open to all.

In my walk with Christ, over many decades, I have learned that it is human nature to draw circles around ourselves, to define the areas of our beliefs. Those boundaries mark who is within, and who is outside, the favor of God. It seems I need, and we each need, to mark the boundaries of God's grace.

But the challenge before us this morning, and in fact nearly every moment of our life of faith, is that in the death and resurrection of Christ our Lord, our God, our Savior, the boundaries of grace extend beyond our ability to comprehend.

On this day of resurrection will we vow to live as Christ's own forever, glorying in the grace that is afforded us in his sacrifice? Will we also step forth into a broken world with the hope that all are welcome, worthy, and invited into the grace we revel in this morning?