

Last week I began a series of sermons for this Lent. They are all based on the Baptismal Covenant, the vows and commitments we make when we are baptized; and the vows we renew at least four times a year.

Most particularly the series has a focus on what I call, the five questions of holy obligation. There are actually eight questions in the Baptismal Covenant. The first three are about belief, and the answers rehearse the Apostles Creed, that ancient summation of our faith.

But beginning with our 1979 Prayer Book these questions were followed by five distinct questions focussing on just what such a belief means in our daily lives, both individual, and corporate. Within these question is the heart of the dynamic of our word *belief*. The roots of the word *belief* basically set forth its meaning as *by life*. We show forth what we believe by how we lead our lives.

As we enter our life in Christ, as redeemed, and beloved members of Christ's body, we are asked to live, to show forth the grace we have received.

Last week we explored the corporate life we share. This week the focus becomes a more inward, and personal.

The second question of our Baptismal Covenant is quite piercing:

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

Four verbs: persevere, resist, repent, and return.

If it sounds rather complicated, even as an ongoing effort, it is. If it sounds like it asks a great deal of us, it does. We are broken people living in a broken world, seeking to follow a perfect God, and inherit a blessed life.

I am not one to preach much about sin, and certainly not about guilt. I believe that guilt felt more than 15 minutes is neurosis. Notice there is nothing in this part of our Covenant calling us to harbor, nurture, or forever bear our guilt.

That was accomplished on Good Friday over 2000 years ago on a hill outside Jerusalem. If your soul continues to wallow in messages of condemnation, you are wallowing in lies.

We are redeemed. We are beloved. We are made new. We, in our Baptism, unite our selves to Christ, his death, and resurrection. We are forgiven.

Yet we are still broken, and we live in a still broken world. When we stand this Easter, and renew our Baptismal Vows, we will do so with a sense of hope in our Lord's death, and resurrection, but also with a sense of our own brokenness.

I will ask the question, "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord." You will answer, "I will, with God's help."

I will not ask such questions as,

Are you worthless?

Are you nothing but a disappointment to God?

Are you beyond the love of God, and the power of Christ's redemption?

Instead I will ask a more basic question that acknowledges that we are human, broken, and injured, and, try as we might, and long as we do, we are not able to respond to God with perfect faithfulness, and pure intention.

And so we are asked, "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"

This question is not an indictment, or even an invitation to humiliate ourselves as miserable sinners. Instead, it is simply a matter-of-fact recognition that we are imperfect, yet we desire to grow, and discover our redemption in Christ.

Will you persevere? Will you try to live righteously? Will you pursue a godly life?

Will you persist in resisting evil? Will you seek to discern right and wrong? Will you act upon that discernment? Will you prayerfully consider God's will in conjunction with your will? Are you up for a struggle as you live in a world that is not aligned, and even opposed to, the love of God?

Whenever you sin will you repent? Let me pause for a second, and give you some background.

This question had a number of drafts within the House of Bishops as the new Prayer Book was being drafted, and the Baptismal Covenant was being

formed. Originally this question read as “If you sin....” Of course, *if* doesn’t quite fit into biblical, or traditional theological ideas.

So the Bishops considered using the word *when*, as in “When you sin....” But there was a discussion if this was an insensitive question when baptizing an earnest new member, or an infant, or small child.

The Bishops settled on the less confrontative, but more accurate, *whenever*. So within this covenant of our Baptism it is assumed that we will make mistakes, and that we are imperfect. We are simply asked that whenever we are faced with such a reality how will we act?

The question continues, “will you repent....”

Repent is a central word in Christianity. It has a lot of negative connotations about sinfulness, immorality, or iniquity. But that is a perversion of its meaning.

Repent, in English, is the usual translation of the Greek word *metanoia*, which simply means “to change one’s mind”. Basically it means, “to turn around.”

I knew a priest who told me the story of Billy Graham visiting his seminary as a guest lecturer in the height of the evangelist’s status as a primary voice of Christianity. My friend was in a lecture Mr Graham was leading for these future Episcopal priests.

At one point, Mr Graham said, “The grace of God is such that if we take 99 steps toward God, God will take that last step toward us.” The lecture continued while my friend pondered the impact of that statement.

The class fell into nervous silence when he spoke up, and said, “Excuse me, does that mean if we take one step toward God that God will take 99 steps toward us?”

The tension, he said, was palpable in the classroom as Billy Graham stood in silence. He pondered the question for what seemed like forever, then he replied, “Yes. That is the power of the cross.”

Repentance simply means turning from our trek away from God to face the source of our grace, and the source of our life.

Which leads to the last verb of this question: return. Will our repentance include returning? Will we turn, face the Lord, and then begin our trek back into the fuller presence of our God?

Surely repentance leads to redemption, or, to put it more accurately, it leads to our awareness that we are redeemed. But are we willing to enter more fully into that redemption, and approach the throne of grace?

Will you persevere? Will you endeavor to find yourself in God's will daily? In each moment?

Will you resist? Will you humbly accept that we are called to a profound, and even costly, love affair with God?

Will you repent? Will you continually seek to discern if you are approaching God, or retreating from God?

Will you return? Will you find yourself in the presence of God, a presence that always surrounds you, and invites you to experience it more deeply, and at every moment?

If we hear this second question of our Baptismal Covenant, and understand it as focussing on our sinfulness, suggesting that we are unworthy of God's love, we are profoundly mistaken.

Instead this question call us to a real, practical, mature, and deeply meaningful relationship with God our Father, Christ our Savior, and the Holy Spirit our Advocate.