

Vows To Keep

**Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009**

This morning five young adults are confirming their baptismal vows. For the past few months they've been having deep and serious conversations about what it means to be a disciple of Christ and a member of his Church and today they are ready to publicly profess their faith in God and then vow to be the best they can be for Christ and his Kingdom.

Loyalty is a key ingredient to significant living and rituals for expressing our loyalty help us remember our highest priorities. For instance, the typical Roman soldier possessed an intense loyalty to the highest ideals of the Roman Empire and once a year in a moving and intense ceremony each soldier renewed his pledge to defend, and if necessary die for that cause greater than himself. Because Rome conquered the world these soldiers reasoned their capacity for loyalty was unmatched by anyone else until the Christians came along and were willing to die for the Kingdom not of this world.

Let's face it. You don't get very far in life without making and keeping vows. Every school day teachers and students pledge allegiance to the flag. Soldiers and public officials vow to protect and defend the constitution. In marriage you vow to commit yourself to the other for "as long as you both shall live." Business contracts are vows to keep your agreements. There'd be no civilized society if we didn't make and keep our promises.

But remember this: the single most important vow any of us will ever make is the vow to trust Christ with your life and follow him wherever he takes you. And remember this too: the only reason you can even hope to keep this promise is because God has already promised he would always be faithful to you.

These promises are documented throughout the Bible. Here's one from the Old Testament. "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed, says the Lord who has compassion on you." (Isaiah 54:10) And in the New Testament: "If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for God cannot disown himself." (2 Timothy 2:13)

But knowing God is always faithful doesn't give you license to take advantage. We need to keep our promise and have that brand of loyalty that is unequalled by others. But we also need to remember this: faithful devotion to God can only begin with prayer.

Luke tells us before Jesus ascended into heaven he instructed his disciples to return to Jerusalem and wait.

In Acts 1:14 Luke wrote, while the disciples waited in the Upper Room they were “constantly devoting themselves to prayer.”

Every Sunday I encourage you to pray. Always. Not just at bedtime, but throughout the day because prayer is one of the essentials. You need to talk and listen to God and get plugged in and connected so you can become increasingly aware of his sacred presence and will for our lives.

But most of us don't pray as much as we should, because we're programmed for instant gratification, so when our prayers don't yield immediate results we get discouraged and slack off. So maybe we need to lower our expectations and consider the possibility that God's presence is constantly impacting us more than we realize. We just have to get with the program.

While I was preparing for today's sermon, thinking about that first Pentecost, myself, my ministry and you, I kept wondering, “Lord, when will you bring a latter day Pentecost experience to Babcock?” And I got the answer, “Harry, I already did. You guys just need to get with the program!”

I think we think God needs to be as up front and personal as he was way back in the good ole Bible days. We want to see the burning bush and hear God's booming voice. We want the Holy Spirit to rush over us like a mighty wind. In other words we expect God to hit us right between the eyes with visions, signs and wonders. Maybe once in a great while, maybe you'll encounter God in some over the top way. But most of the time, God's more subtle and comes to us in very ordinary ways.

A man, wanting one of those overwhelming, indescribable experiences with God, approached the High Priest of the Jerusalem Temple, begging to enter the Holy of Holies not only the most sacred place in the temple but the most sacred place on earth. Not surprisingly the High Priest said, “No, you don't know what you're asking,” but the man persisted, so the Priest said, “All right, you can enter the Holy of Holies on one condition. For the next ten, no twenty years you must work in the temple, scrubbing floors, taking out the garbage and any other lowly task you are asked to do.”

Amazingly the man agreed. But the Priest was sure sooner than later he'd get discouraged and quit, but he didn't.

Twenty years passed and the High Priest was obliged to let the man into the Holy of Holies. He took the man to a great heavy door and announced, “When you walk through this door, you will enter the Holy of Holies.”

The man closed his eyes, held his breath, walked through the door, then opened his eyes and found himself outside the temple on a noisy, smelly Jerusalem street. Vendors were bargaining, beggars begging and children were playing.

For just an instant he felt used and cheated, but then, wisdom, he realized for the very first time, God's presence in the middle of everyday life.

I tell this story to make a point: Maybe our vows to be faithful followers of Christ would be easier to keep if only we lower our unrealistic expectations and begin to trust God keeps his promises, and is present in every person you meet, and that every situation you encounter becomes an opportunity for God to use you in extraordinary ways.

So you don't need to see the burning bush or hear God's booming voice. You don't have to experience rushing wind and tongues of fire. You just have to keep your vow to put Jesus first, trusting that even when you break your vow, God keeps his promise and forgives when, like the Prodigal Son, you come to your senses.

I'd like to direct my concluding remarks to the young men and women who today will confirm the vows made on their behalf on the day of their baptisms. But the rest of you no matter how old or wise you may be should listen too because all of us, no matter how old or wise, are still God's children needing both Divine guidance, and affirmation.

First of all my young friends, always remember this: God loves you, especially when you don't necessarily like yourself. He loves you because God, your Father, created you to be special and unique. No one else on earth is quite like you. You have a unique personality, the gift of imagination and the potential to be creative. You were born with the capacity to take good and positive risks and the ability to love and be loved. You were born with the unusual aptitude to trust the unseen and believe the universe is not just a random accident or a cruel joke.

But notice I said you were "born" with the capacity for this and the potential for that. You were "born" with abilities and aptitudes, gifts and talents. But the question is, "What will you do with them?"

A teacher told her student, "You're a very gifted young man."

The student said, "Thank you."

The teacher responded, "Why are you thanking me? I didn't mean to compliment you. I simply made the observation you are gifted and talented. You didn't achieve these things they were given to you. Come back twenty years from now and show me what you did with your gifts and talents, then I'll compliment you."

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Maybe the teacher was abrupt with her student, but she made her point: do the best you can with what you got to keep your vow to love God, your neighbor and yourself and live deliberately for Christ and his Kingdom.

And when the times come and your faith weakens, and you stray off the path, when you've disappointed God, yourself and the people who depend on you always remember God keeps his promise to love you forever as his own.

You all have great futures and real contributions to better our world. May God bless, protect and keep you now and forever. Amen.