

## **Baptism Series #4: Striving for justice and peace and respecting the dignity of every human being through the work of the Helpful Shop**

Sunday, Jan. 28, 2018

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist, Aptos, CA

The Reverend Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

Sermon Text(s): Baptismal Covenant Question #5,

Welcome to all our guests and visitors this morning! We're so glad you have joined us for this special service as we honor and celebrate the work of the non-profit organizations in our community that we support through the proceeds from the Helpful Shop, our thrift store in Capitola.

Here at St. John's, we're in the middle of a preaching series on our Baptismal Covenant, the vows that all people who are baptized, confirmed, or received into the Episcopal Church make when they choose to join this church. These vows outline our understanding of what it means to be a Christian and to live in the way of Jesus. The covenant has five questions, and we're looking at one question per week. This week, we'll consider the fifth and last question of our Baptismal Covenant:

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

It is interesting to note that this is the only question in our Baptismal Covenant that does not say anything about

God, Jesus, or the Christian faith. It is a question that people of all faiths and none could answer affirmatively. I know Jews and Muslims and Sikhs and Buddhists and Baha'is and Hindus and indigenous people and agnostics and atheists who “strive for justice and peace among all people” and “respect the dignity of every human being” in their daily lives, people for whom these values are the bedrock of their activism and their advocacy for vulnerable and marginalized communities.

For us in the Episcopal Church, this question is a summary of our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. It is the last question of our Baptismal Covenant and, in a sense, summarizes all the questions that came before it. We vow to strive for justice and peace among all people and to respect the dignity of every human being because that is what Jesus did, and what he calls us to do.

Our scripture readings today speak a little bit to this theme: Paul encourages the people of Corinth to respect their fellow believers by considering how their choices and actions will affect others, and Jesus respects the dignity of the man possessed by a demon by healing him. But today's lectionary readings give us only a small glimpse of the many, many examples throughout our scriptures of how following in the way of Jesus means to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being.

Jesus consistently advocated for a peaceful ethic in the form of nonviolence, teaching his followers “not [to] resist an evildoer” (Matthew 5:39), to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39), and to “love [their] enemies” (Luke 6:28). He said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

He taught in parables that in the kingdom of God, “the last will be first and the first will be last.” When we truly live as God wants us to live, Jesus said, those at the bottom or on the margins of our society will be lifted up and given equal treatment to those with the most wealth and power. And he showed us what this looks like by intentionally reaching out to those his society said were unclean or unworthy, by not excluding anyone from his love and mercy. Our vow to **strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being** is a vow to live as Jesus taught us to live.

I can't think of a better illustration of what this vow looks like in action than the work our grant recipients are doing in our community: mentoring children in need, helping those with developmental or neurological disorders reclaim the full use of their bodies, feeding and sheltering people experiencing homelessness, empowering people to participate in society by teaching English and literacy skills, growing food to feed the farmworkers who can't afford the food they work so hard to grow for others, bringing a word of hope to those in prison, counseling women with difficult choices to make around unexpected pregnancies, training our community in disaster relief

preparedness, caring for all God's creation and helping those with physical limitations get out into it and enjoy it. This is holy and sacred work! This is God's work, and we are honored to partner with the 25 organizations receiving grants from the Helpful Shop this year in doing this work in our community.

To our grant recipients: Thank you for walking the talk. Thank you for walking in love, as Christ loved us, and being a living icon to our community of what it looks like to follow in the way of Jesus.

To the St. John's community: Thank you for supporting their work through donating items to the Helpful Shop, working shifts at the shop, and volunteering directly with some of our grant recipient organizations.

Every time you buy or sell a shirt or a pair of shoes at the Helpful Shop, you're working for justice and peace among all people. Every time you donate old glassware or a toaster, you're respecting the dignity of every human being. As a sacramental people, we believe that God uses physical, tangible things to share his grace with us. If we truly believe that, every transaction at the Helpful Shop is potentially as sacred as the act of receiving communion. May God help us make it so!