

Baptism Series #6: Our Baptismal Vows call us to balance worship and study with ethical action in the world

Sunday, Feb. 11, 2018

Last Sunday After the Epiphany

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

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Sermon Text(s): Baptismal Covenant Question #1, Mark 9:2-9

This week, as we conclude our sermon series on the Baptismal Covenant, in a very biblical twist, we'll be ending at the beginning. The last shall be first, and the first shall be last. The final vow we'll consider is the first vow we make in the Baptismal Covenant, after professing our faith in Christ. After reciting the Apostles Creed, we are asked,

“Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and the prayers?”

If you've been following along with how I've tried to make a connection between the lectionary readings and a question from the Baptismal Covenant each week, you're probably wondering how the heck I'm going to connect the Transfiguration, our story from the Gospel reading today, with this question. What does the story of Jesus taking Peter, James and John up on a high mountain where his glory is revealed have to do with our baptismal vow to “continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?”

Well, this question asks us not if we will follow Jesus's teachings or strive to live as Jesus did, but if we will continue in the *apostles'* teaching – and Peter, James and John are some of those apostles. (I know, it's a stretch, but hey, at least it's some kind of connection with the scripture for today!)

In all seriousness, the stories we have about Jesus – what he did, what he taught, the fact that this Transfiguration experience happened, how he died, and the fact that he appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead – all these stories were given to us not by Jesus himself, but by the apostles – the people who experienced these things and passed them down to us. We wouldn't have known about the Transfiguration at all if Peter, James, and John didn't tell others about it, who then told others, who told others, who told others, who eventually told us.

This question from our Baptismal Covenant is really a question about church tradition. It's asking if we will maintain the traditions of the church that have been passed down to us and continue to pass them down to others. This is a charge that comes to us directly from Scripture – chapter 2 of the Book of Acts tells us that those who were baptized after the Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

But what exactly is meant by **“the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers?”**

The **“apostles teaching”** refers to the message about Jesus’s birth, life, death, and resurrection, the “good news of God in Christ” that we are called to proclaim: all those stories the apostles passed down to us about what Jesus said and did, and their understanding of who he was. It is summarized in the Creeds, and the church has continued to expand upon these foundational beliefs in its doctrine and teaching throughout the centuries. When we vow to “continue in the apostles’ teaching,” we are vowing to study the scriptures and church tradition, both what the church has taught historically and the way that is taking shape in our own day, and to pass that teaching on to a new generation. When you come to Bible study, when you tell Bible stories to children, when you read scripture or books about Christian history or theology, you are “continuing in the apostles’ teaching.”

What about the **“apostles’ fellowship”**? The church has always been clear that you cannot be a Christian by yourself. Fellowship, community, connection with other Christians is of utmost importance. The apostles came together on a regular basis to encourage one another in their faith and to worship together, and Christians have continued to do that throughout the ages. Fellowship is critical. We cannot keep the faith alone. We need each other.

The apostles' fellowship also refers to the chain of connection between modern-day Christians all the way back to the earliest apostles, a concept known as the apostolic succession. The idea is that the apostles laid hands on certain leaders among the people and prayed for them to commission them for ministry in Jesus's name. Those people then laid their hands on other leaders to commission them, who then laid their hands on others, and so on, creating an unbroken chain of leaders all the way to the present day. In the Episcopal Church, we believe the apostolic succession is passed down through the office of the episcopate – the order of bishops. The presence of bishops in our church is a symbol of our connection to the apostles' fellowship, to the collective leadership of the church that stretches back to its very origins. When a bishop lays hands on us at our baptism, confirmation, or reception into the Episcopal Church, we too become participants in the "apostles' fellowship," commissioned for ministry in Jesus's name as the mantle of leadership is given to us as well.

"The breaking of the bread" is the celebration of the Eucharist – the ceremonial meal that Jesus commanded us to continue "in remembrance of him" until he comes again. It is the central act of worship of the church, and when we are baptized we make a vow to continue in that tradition, to regularly receive the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is essentially "Act II" of the sacrament of Christian initiation: traditionally, when one was initiated into the faith through baptism, one would simultaneously

receive one's first communion in that same service. The Eucharist is the "repeatable" part of our sacrament of initiation. Each time we receive the Eucharist we are renewing our baptismal vows and re-committing ourselves to follow Christ. In receiving his presence into our bodies, we are strengthened for the work we are called to do in his name.

And finally, "**the prayers**" are the prayers the church has taught us – the Lord's Prayer, the various litanies and liturgies that the church has passed down to us – as well as individual, personal prayers offered up to God spontaneously from our hearts. When we vow to continue "in the prayers," we are vowing to keep alive the ancient prayers that have been passed down to us as well as to maintain an active personal prayer life.

Our vow to preserve and pass on the rituals and traditions of the Christian faith – "**to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers**" – is foundational to what we vow to do when we are baptized. It is the first question we are asked after we recite the Creed. But it does not stand alone. It is grouped with the other four baptismal vows to show that observing ritual and "maintaining tradition" alone are not enough. Jesus and the prophets taught that ritual observance without proper ethical behavior is meaningless. We can teach the doctrines of the church and come to Eucharist and say all the right prayers all day long, but if we're not also "seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves,"

and “striving for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being,” then we’ve entirely missed the point.

Unfortunately, much of our society has seen too much of the ritual observance and too little of the ethical behavior from the church, and as a result, many people have thrown the baby out with the bathwater, assuming that the only important thing is ethical behavior. “What has ritual behavior done for anyone except make them hypocrites?” they say. “Just ‘strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being’ and you’ve pretty much got it covered.”

But from the church’s perspective, it’s not a question of either/or, but of both/and. It’s not ritual observance OR ethical behavior, it’s ritual observance AND ethical behavior.

We can do ethical behavior without ritual observance, sure, but it’s a lot more likely to lead to burnout if we do, because the ritual observances of the church are designed to feed us, to guide us, to sustain us as we do that ethical behavior we’re called to do.

We come to Eucharist not just for the sake of coming to Eucharist, not just to obey what the church told us to do, but to be renewed and recharged for the work God calls us to do in the world.

We read the scriptures, the work of great theologians, and study church history not because the church gave us a homework assignment, but because the teachings of the church inspire and motivate us to work for justice and peace. Church history connects us with the saints who have walked this path before us. As we work for justice and peace, the voices of Christians who have stood up against injustice in the past – from the earliest apostles who said to the Roman courts, “We must obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29) to modern-day prophets like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1930s Germany, who challenged his church’s complicity in the Nazis’ rise to power – help us to know that we are not alone in this work.

We gather in community with other Christians, we receive the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, and we study the teachings of Christians who have gone before us to support and facilitate the hard work of ethical living and advocating for justice that God calls us to do in our own day.

It is fitting that our study of this question is the conclusion rather than the beginning of our study of the Baptismal Covenant, because it relies on all the other questions we’ve considered to give it meaning and value. If all we do is come to church and receive Eucharist and study scripture and we don’t offer sanctuary to refugees or feed the hungry or advocate for just governance in our land, we will have missed the point. But by the same token, if ALL we do is offer sanctuary to refugees and

feed the hungry and advocate for just governance in our land and we don't also study scripture and come to church and receive Eucharist, we'll be missing out on a vital source of support and strength for that work. The balance between the two is key to how we in the Episcopal Church understand what it means to be a Christian and to live a Christian life.