

Sermon 2-2-20
Paul Purdue preaching

Baptized to Follow Christ - February 2, 2020

In 1997, on a clear cloudless night not long after Lewis was born, I felt a pull to carry Lewis outside. Maybe I felt a bond so rich that being surrounded by walls and held in by a ceiling seemed wrong. I looked up at the starry sky. That same sky called out to Abraham and Sarah. An overwhelming sense of something-ness washed over me. I lifted our little swaddled baby up over my head offering Lewis to God and the Universe. My vow was too deep for words. Perhaps it mimicked our baptismal vows. "I will you do everything in my power to nurture and care for this child...with God's help I will strive with all I have to live according to the example of Christ and surround this child with love and forgiveness..." There was no shooting star, burning bush, or descending dove, but standing in our backyard, I experienced a moment as holy, as I have ever known- gratitude and dependance, hope and fear, love and commitment.

So back in October, I came home from a church meeting at 8pm to discover Connie fumbling through our spare key drawer. I learned that the technology often aids our loads had failed Lewis. A low key-fob battery allowed Lewis to lock his keys inside his car, something the engineers had designed not to happen. Lewis was in Huntsville heading to the engineering lab. As I made the two hour drive down, I pondered a little lecture about changing batteries. The drive time shifted my focus to Lewis working 20 hours and staying an honors student. I recalled my own embarrassing missteps and talks with my Dad. Lewis left the lab when I called and stood by his car as I pulled up. His huge smile radiated relief and his genuine gratitude. I felt like his childhood hero again. Thankfully, I did not allow my weariness to pile a lecture onto his embarrassment. His big grin and my momentary heroic stature was worth a four hour trip for an hour of conversation in the student center coffee shop! I would ride through hell on a slow moving mule for that kid... I made that kind of vow 22 years ago.

Do you think of your baptismal vows as matters of intellectual agreement or a commitment to a certain way of being and living in the world? *Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in God's grace, and promise to serve Christ as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?*

How does that confession of faith change our living? The vows themselves offer a context for faith. A Christian confession of faith involves loving people! Faith is practiced "in union with the church" which is open to all people! John Wesley said, "There is no such thing as solitary Christianity." Love dies without people to love. Love is not transactional. "The person who doesn't love does not know God, because God is love." 1 John 4

Our confession of "Jesus as our Lord and Savior" calls us to serve Christ. We do this by serving people: all people. We "*promise to serve Christ as our Lord, in union with all people*". Love God. Love neighbor. Love drives to Huntsville with an extra set of keys. Love changes diapers. Love washes feet.

Love forgives. Love keeps no record of wrongs suffered. Love feeds hungry people. Love welcomes immigrants. Love prays for persecutors. Love ends persecution.

John Wesley preached a sermon called the Marks of the New Birth. Wesley preached about the “identifying” markers of Christianity. Authentic faith changes how we live. They will know us by our love! Wesley offers three identifying Christian markers: faith, hope and love!

1. Faith- “not meager intellectual assent but a disposition wrought by God in the heart.” Faith is not an end in itself but a process to love (The Law Established by Faith)
2. Hope is the inner connection our spirit with God’s Holy’s Spirit. It is a living hope.
3. Love is the greatest of all Christian markers. It is at least a three fold movement. a) We come to know that we are beloved by God: God’s Love is poured into our hearts. b) We love and serve God: love returning Love. c) God’s Love, by its nature, grows our love for “every soul that God has made”, with no exceptions. Wesley says we love “enemies, those who despitely use us, or even persecute us”.

For Wesley the goal of life was reaching perfection in loving God by loving others.

What does it mean to vow to follow Jesus? Jesus announced, “Change your hearts and lives, for the kingdom of heaven is coming to earth!” Jesus called, “Come, follow me.” Peter, James and John left their boats, nets, hired hands, and families and followed Christ. And Jesus traveled around teaching the good news and healing every disease and sickness among the people.” Will we follow Jesus? Will we allow God’s love to change our hearts and lives? Will we leave something behind? Will we live to bring Good News and healing? Will we help construct a kingdom of love, justice, hope, and forgiveness?

Sadly, many churches are not sanctuaries of good news, healing, love and forgiveness. Maybe some of our failure to resemble Jesus resides in the creeds we rehearse and aspire to. Richard Rohr contends our creeds have turned Jesus’ life and into what Rohr calls: The Great Comma. Rohr asks us to consider the Apostles Creed...that says, “I believe in Jesus Christ, his only son our Lord, who was born of the Virgin Mary, (COMMA) suffered under Pontius Pilot.” Rohr notes the creeds focus more on Jesus’ death than Jesus’ life. Does such a belief driven system, allow us to get saved and then shape Jesus to fit our values? Rohr notes “The Apostles Creed does not once mention love, service, hope, the least of these, or even forgiveness- anything, actually, that is remotely actionable. It is a theological statement with no mission statement... This may in some way explain Christianity's often dismal record in imitating Jesus's actual life and teaching.”

Maybe we need a new creed, something like:

I believe in God the Creator Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth
And in Jesus Christ, Love’s perfect incarnation,
Who was born to an unwed mother and escaped to Egypt as a refugee,

Who brought good news and healing everywhere Christ went,
Who worshipped each week in the synagogue and liberally broke religious rules,
Who flipped over the Temple's money tables and tenderly blessed babies,
Who helped the blind see and washed disciples' feet,
Who ate with those called as unclean and called out religious hypocrisy,
Who taught us to love neighbors, strangers, and even enemies,
Who forgives seventy times seventy times,
Who suffered on the cross and rose victorious into eternal life,
Who commissioned women preachers on Easter,
and poured God's Holy Spirit on everyone on Pentecost,
Who blinded Paul on the Damascus Road and taught Peter accept all people,
Who comes and dwells with us today,
As we break bread and feed the hungry,
As we clothe the naked and welcome the stranger,
As we forgive others and turn the other cheek,
As we build a kingdom on earth as in heaven,
Whose way is easy, and whose yoke is light,
Whose gives rest to our weary souls and peace surpasses understanding,
Whose love never ends. Amen.

How is your vow that "Jesus is your Lord" directing your living? Before Christianity became the civil religion of Rome in 337 CE, to name Jesus as Lord was to challenge the empire. It was a revolutionary statement. The "proclamation of Jesus as Son of God, Lord, and Saviour directly countered Roman Imperial theology... Jesus was Lord and the emperor was not! "Jesus is Lord" was high treason!... (The)message challenged the normalcy of civilization, then and now, with an alternative vision of how life on earth can and should be. "Jesus is Lord" offers fundamental opposition... Who is our Lord: Jesus or an empire? Jesus Christ as Lord led to resistance to the imperial vision, and advocacy of a different vision of the way the world can be". (Marcus Borg- The First Paul) Does our confession of Jesus as Lord, offer us a different vision of how to live today? Is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount our life's work and our daily planner?

Jesus invites us to, "Change your hearts and lives" and enter into building the kingdom of heaven. Jesus whispers in the business of our living "Come, follow me." Will we leave our boats, our spreadsheets, our hired hands, our politics, and our bottom-line mentality to follow Christ? Who will be our Lord and Savior: Jesus, Jeff Bezos, Donald Trump, Elizabeth Warren, Ronaldo, Rihanna, Lizzo, or Dolly? Will we strive to bring good news and healing to this world? Will we follow Jesus and allow God's love to change our hearts and lives?

And since we love transactions so much, we ask, what will we get for following Jesus? Faith. Hope. Love. By following Jesus, we catch a vision beyond empire and surpassing our stuff. We find a life rooted in love. And with God's presence, and through God's love, we learn to live lives of love. Our way of being becomes marked by faith, hope, and love. And so we save a lecture and drive back from Huntsville with undue joy. But more than that, we know our sacred worth, feed hungry strangers, clothe neighbors, welcome fearful

immigrants, cross borders, comfort prisoners, forgive enemies, call out oppressors, challenge empires, lift up the poor, open blind eyes, heal fractured communities, and build something of heaven on earth by sowing love. That may be enough. But there is a promise of more that through Christ our lives will get caught up in God's love that enfolds, and holds, and loves us forever, and ever. Amen.