

I will, with God's Help: Living our Baptismal Covenant

In an article in The Vestry Papers, The Rev. Canon Howard Kently Williams reflects on the Baptismal Covenant and its deep, foundational importance in our lives as Faith leaders and as a parish. What follows is an adapted message that I hope will begin to help us think on how we will fashion a vision and mission for our lives together in the coming year.

This Sunday, weather permitting, we will once again renew our Baptismal Covenant and as we say each time:

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

Through Holy Baptism, lay and ordained church leaders are called to share in the priesthood of Christ. That means that we are not only to believe the concepts embodied in the Baptismal Covenant, but we are to become what we believe. Each time we, as a community, renew our Baptismal Covenant, the hope is that pieces of our old selves begin to atrophy and die, so that we may become more Christ-like in our interactions with one another and all of God's people. Respecting the dignity of every human being is not an easy thing to do for many people, we all, in some way, fall short of this hope unless closely tended. With God's help, however, respecting the dignity of another person becomes the only thing we can do because we are incapable of seeing anything other than Jesus Christ in the faces of humanity.

The Baptismal Covenant is the solemn promise or sacred agreement in which God, the principal actor, adopts human persons as his children, and makes them members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the Kingdom of God. What is so very hopeful is that God will never revoke this action, and nothing anyone does can change the love and mercy that God has accomplished.

This is very good news for those who are elderly, young, gay, or homeless; they are often in our culture and times treated as persons to be pitied, forgiven or ostracized.

For any parish, even if not especially a small rural parish like Christ Church, to take as its mission the work "to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ" represents a deep engagement with the Baptismal Covenant. It may seem overwhelming, but we can begin to name the ways and means through which all persons are welcome and accepted as God's own children.

To be a people led by our Baptismal Covenant, the church must constantly and consistently facilitate authentic, sacramental worship, and intentional, mutual caring, with teaching and training.

This is a great focus for us as clergy and lay together. I am convinced that the most effective form of congregational leadership happens when clergy and elected, appointed or informal lay leaders work as a team. We are here to share in this work together, to leave our secular understandings and habits at the door and seek to find mutual, compassionate, joyful ways to make God's kingdom seeable and touchable in all that we do together—from Vestry meetings, the Annual meeting, any ministry team meeting, from soup to nuts can be grounded in our sacred covenant.

The work of a parish is too much for any one person or group, it takes all of us, pulling together to become a shining light that creates a magnetic draw. And God most often reveals God's truth and will to ALL God's covenanted people, not only to the ordained.

For example, our life and ministry together can be organized into three areas, which are owned by the entire congregation:

1. Spirituality and Formation - the food for all Christians. This includes the ritual worship and other pastoral rites of the church, bible studies, retreats, and other formational opportunities.
2. Mission and Ministry - the call of all Christians. Every ministry team in the church can organize themselves to engage those things that will help us live our Baptismal Covenant. I have already begun this work with a couple of Ministry Teams and hope to engage with all in this transformative exercise.
3. Management and Finance - the infrastructure, which provides the support needed for our corporate life. These include what Rev. Williams calls the 7Ps: property, personnel, policy, procedures, polity, planning, and program. Finance is the Big Four: budget, planned giving, investments, and fund raising.

As Reverend Canon Williams states, "The Baptismal Covenant requires an awareness and acceptance of who we are as those who follow Jesus through the Episcopal Church, our religious tradition and the social and economic concerns in our community. Living into the Covenant requires an inward journey into us, and willingness and readiness, in a developmentally appropriate way, to confess publicly, through word and deed, that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives."

I hope all of you will come to join us at the Annual Meeting to celebrate the year that was and anticipate the year to come; a year predicted to be wonderfully filled with opportunities to grow as a people of God in the 21st Century!

Grace and Peace, Stephanie+