

A sermon preached on the 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 16, August 25, 2024. at the Baptism of Angelo Vazquez, Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt Rev. Gordon Scruton  
 Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18. Psalm 34:15-22. Ephesians 6:10-20. John 6:56-69

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This morning, Alex and Jessica are doing what Jesus taught us to do by bringing their son Angelo to be baptized.

What comes to your mind when you think about baptism? Some people think of loving babies and wondering how they will respond during their baptism. Since we don't have many baptisms in this parish at this season of our life, you may have forgotten what we actually say and promise in baptism. You may have forgotten the lifelong implications of your baptism. So I invite you to join me in talking through the baptism liturgy, to see if you might discover some new insights that are intended to shape our lives as long as we live.

In baptism, God adopts us and comes to dwell in us as we begin our spiritual journey. And baptism initiates us into a way of life and into a community of Jesus followers around the world and down through the centuries, who seek to help each other keep learning and maturing in our practice of following Jesus, allowing the Spirit of Jesus to guide every aspect of our lives each day for as long as we live.

The baptism liturgy is a wonderfully concise and practical summary of what the Bible and the Church down through the centuries have taught about how God wants us to love God and our neighbors. So please take out your Red Prayer Books and turn to page 302, so you can follow along as we briefly review our Baptismal Covenant.

At the top of page 302 the parents and godparents are asked, will you be responsible for seeing that Angelo is brought up to experience the Christian way of life; and will you by your prayers and witness or example help Angelo keep growing into the fullness of life in relationship with Christ? They, like all of us, know how difficult it is to be good examples all the time, so they respond, this is my desire, but I can only do it with God's help.

Next the parents and godparents take three negative vows and three positive vows on behalf of Angelo. If you look across the page to the middle of p. 303 you will see that in Confirmation Angelo will be asked to reaffirm these same negative and positive vows as his personal commitment. Will you reaffirm your renunciation or rejection of evil and renew your commitment to Jesus Christ? Do you see the connection between Baptism and Confirmation? We keep asking God to help us live these vows of saying no to one way of life and saying yes to another way we live for as long as we live.

Next the congregation is asked if we will do all in our power to support Angelo in his life in Christ. While Jessica was baptized in this church and Alex was baptized in another church, the Vazquez family worships at a church near their home outside of Philadelphia. So this morning, we will take the vows in the name of the community where they worship. It is a reminder that, as long as we live, we all need the help and support of a community if we want to follow the Jesus way of life. We can't do it alone.

Then the liturgy invites us **all** to renew our baptism covenant with God and to ask ourselves: in what ways am I still living these vows, this way of life I promised to live in my baptism and

confirmation? What next steps might God be inviting me to take in living my baptism vows at this time in my life?

Next, on p. 304, we reaffirm our faith and trust in God the Holy Trinity by praying Apostles Creed, the oldest statement of faith in the Christen church, written sometime in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. We don't have time to go into this Creed in depth, but it is important to know that this expresses what Christians around the world have believed as the central core of our faith from the very beginning and in the present day.

But how does this Creed connect to our daily lives? How do we live out of a relationship with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? What does God expect of us? Immediately after the Creed, near the bottom of page 304 we are asked questions which outline the way of life we were agreed to follow:

**Will you continue**.... Notice that word **continue**. Baptism and Confirmation are not just events we attend, check off the box and say, I've done that. They are the beginning of a challenging, continuing way of life and love. None of us can ever fully live this way of life, yet we promise God and ourselves and the Christian community, that we will continue seeking to learn and practice this way of life for as long as we live.

How do we keep learning and growing in our relationship with God? Like the first followers of Jesus, we **continue in the Apostles teaching**, by reading and learning from the Bible as the Holy Spirit communicates God's wisdom and guidance to us.

We **continue in the apostles' fellowship**, spending time formally and informally with other followers of Jesus to talk about the questions, the joys and struggles of seeking to live the Jesus way of life and love in our particular situation.

We keep receiving fresh transfusions of the Spirit of Jesus into our bodies **through the breaking of the bread** in the Eucharist.

We **continue in a life of prayer**, both with other followers of Jesus in worship and alone in our daily lives. We talk with God at the beginning and end of each day; we rely on God's loving presence moment by moment, through whatever each day brings. Prayer is the constant connection we have with the God who loves us, who is always with us, eager to help us.

If we only engage in these spiritual practices in superficial, rote kind of ways, they may feel like an empty, worthless duty. Yet, if we continually engage in these spiritual practices with a deep desire to keep learning and being renewed by God's Spirit to live the Jesus way of love in our daily lives, then these spiritual practices can become joyful, life-giving nourishment to sustain us.

After each of these questions, we reply: **I will, with God's help**. We promise to do our best to live this way, and we all know truth is, we can't continue in this way of life without the daily help of God's Spirit; so every morning and throughout each day we keep asking for and depending on God's help to live this love for God and neighbor.

The next question is: **Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"** As we heard in today's reading from Ephesians, the early followers of Jesus recognized that there are evil forces in the world, that tempt us, like Adam and Eve in the Garden, to make ourselves the center of our lives, and to rebel against God's way of love. This vow

reminds us that there is evil in the world around us and there are evil thoughts and temptations that invade each of our minds and hearts. Following the Jesus way of love requires life-long struggle and vigilance to recognize and resist the evil in the world around us and the evil that invades our thoughts and desires.

Notice the word “**whenever** you fall into sin”. It assumes what we will all keep sinning and failing to live the Jesus way of love. This is normal for all of us. Remember, we never promise to be perfect followers of Jesus, so we don’t need to be discouraged at what slow learners we are and how often we fail. We **do** promise that whenever we recognize that we have strayed from God’s way of love, our first response will be to turn back to God and say, I messed up again, God. I need your forgiveness and your help to begin again, right now, to focus on seeking to live your way of love.

Let’s pause for a moment and take a slow deep breath...are you still with me?

The next vow is: “**Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?**” Our relationship with God is not just something private that we keep to ourselves. God walks with us so we can help others learn to walk with God as they go through the joys and challenges of life. We never try to manipulate or coerce people to become followers of Jesus. But Jesus does call us to be witnesses. A witness simply tells others what they have seen and experienced.

Many people in our society have never had any one to talk to about God. You may be the only person that some of your friends can talk to about their God questions and how they can find God’s help in the problems of their lives. You can simply tell them how you connect with God, what your relationship with Jesus means to you and how God and Christian community have made a positive difference in your life.

Of course, our most powerful witness is our example. Do others see us living the Jesus way of love? Again, none of us will ever be perfect examples. Yet, as we allow the Spirit of Jesus who lives within us, to guide our lives, that Jesus Spirit will shine through even our failures and weaknesses.

This brings us to the next vow: **Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?** This vow is particularly challenging because of one word: “**all**”, all persons. Each of us encounter people we don’t like, people who say and do things which are irritating, bad and contrary to the Jesus way of love. So how do we love them? Since God created each person, in God’s image, we seek to treat each person as we would treat Christ, to love them as we love ourselves, which is not always easy, so we constantly ask for God’s help. O God, please give me a desire to love this person as you love them, with all their flaws, just as you love me with all my flaws.

We get some additional guidance about living with our neighbors in the next vow: **Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?** Loving our neighbors requires us to look at the way we treat people **and** the way our society treats people. We have both personal and public or social responsibilities to strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being. When we see injustice, hostility, verbal, physical and economic violence being directed toward other individuals or groups, God calls us to speak up and act with respect for the presence of Christ in both the victims and the perpetrators.

This is a very demanding vow, especially at this time in our country. Talking about these issues can get us into conflicts with friends and people we really care about. Yet to love all our neighbors as Jesus taught us, we need to find ways, with God’s help, when the time is right, to both

listen respectfully and to speak the truth with love and respect for those with whom we differ and for those who are being denied God's justice and dignity. May God help us all with this.

This challenging liturgy continues with a powerful prayer for the candidates for Baptism or Confirmation in the middle of page 305. As we pray this prayer for Angelo in a few minutes, I invite you to also pray this prayer for yourself. You might even want to pray this prayer for yourself at home, everyday this week. It helps us to focus on what is involved in living our Baptism and on how much we need God's help to live this way of life.

There is still more to the Baptism liturgy, but this is enough to digest for now. I invite you to close your eyes, take a deep breath and be aware that Jesus is here with us right now. Gently ask Jesus to help you reflect on two questions: What was new to me in this quick review of the Baptism liturgy? Which one of these vows might God be inviting me to prayerfully focus on this week in my relationships with God and my neighbors?

As our closing prayer I will sing a song about how God meets us in our baptism and in all the seasons of our lives from birth to death. As I sing, ask yourself, when and how have I experienced God walking with me through all the years since my baptism and at this time in your life?