

**“RENEWING OUR VOWS”**  
**Matthew 3:13-17**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**January 12, 2020**

During my last full-time pastorate in the state of Texas, a middle-aged couple in the congregation came to me one day with a request unlike any I had ever received before. They were approaching their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and they asked me to perform a ceremony in which they would renew their marriage vows. I had certainly heard of such a ritual, but I had never been approached to officiate at one and knew very little about what it might entail. In our initial conversation, I got around to asking them about their expectations for this event. What would it actually look like? But before that, I was interested to know what motivated them to have such a ceremony in the first place. Nearly a quarter of a century had passed since they had exchanged their wedding vows. Why did they want to repeat those vows in a formal setting at this point in their life together?

This couple’s reply was fascinating. The issue was not that they had failed in their marriage and wanted to start over again. They had never broken their vows to each other; however, over the years their vows had come to mean something different, something deeper, than they had meant on the day of their wedding. Their marriage had been a good one, but not a perfect one. Like all committed couples, they had been through highs and lows, happy times and hard times. Through it all they had kept their vows, but they had gained a better understanding of what those vows really involve. And so, they wanted to renew their vows in the light of their lived experience as a husband and wife.

As I listened to this couple’s story, I knew exactly where they were coming from. When I officiate at a wedding ceremony, the most moving part of the service for me is the couple’s exchange of these fateful words: “In the name of God, I take you as my [spouse], to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.” I’ll admit that when I see brides and grooms gazing at each other all starry-eyed and hear them mouthing these words with ease, I sometimes think to myself: “If you only knew! If you only knew what this commitment really requires. If you only knew how your commitment will be tested and challenged ‘from this day forward.’ If you only knew, you might not speak these words so glibly, as if you were reading from the script of a high school play.”

Perhaps you’ve seen the recent television commercial from AT&T showing a bride and groom standing before a minister making their marriage vows. The minister says to the bride: “Do you, Sarah, take Will to be your lawfully wedded husband?” Sarah doesn’t respond immediately. A few seconds pass, and the seconds seem like hours. The groom waits nervously, looking like he has just swallowed sour milk, no doubt worrying that he’s going to be left at the altar. Finally, Sarah smiles and says, “I do”; but Will must still be wondering why Sarah hesitated for so long. Of course, all of this is a set-up for AT&T’s tag line, which boasts of the speed of their mobile network: “When it comes to response times, just OK is not OK.” But the truth is, it would be more than just OK – in fact, it would be highly advisable – if engaged couples would pause and ponder the significance of their vows before they make them.

One of my favorite Christian authors, John Killinger, has written an insightful book entitled *Christ and the Seasons of Marriage*. Killinger describes a phenomenon I have experienced first-hand and often observed in others; namely, that marriages are not static; even the best of marriages change over the years as a couple's circumstances change and as each partner changes individually. Marriages often begin with a honeymoon period, full of passion and idealism; but along come a first big argument, a first child, a job change, a health setback, a financial catastrophe, a move to Omaha, a mid-life crisis, or a moral lapse – and marital bliss is transformed into marital stress. At a number of points in time, married couples actually experience what their wedding vows only prophesy. They endure worse along with better, poorer along with richer, sickness along with health – and this is when the promises they make on their wedding day are really tested. All marriages pass through seasons, and some couples are ill-prepared for these seasons. They have nothing but tank-tops to wear in the dead of winter, so their marriage freezes. Thankfully, other couples acquire a more versatile wardrobe and are better able to cope with changes in climate and circumstance.

And so, I quickly understood why the couple in Texas wanted to renew their vows after 25 years of marriage. They recognized that their relationship had gone through seasons – seasons of ecstasy and boredom, beauty and ugliness, abundance and drought, and would continue to do so. From that vantage point, they felt it was time to update their marriage vows, to refresh them in light of their past years together, and to make better-informed promises for the future.

Friends, has it ever occurred to you that the same dynamics people experience in married life are also at work in our experience of the life of faith? When you and I make our first commitments to Jesus Christ and become members of the Church, we're typically in a honeymoon phase. The Christian life looks like a bed of roses, and the church we are joining looks like the perfect church. We see more easily the benefits of being a Christian than the responsibilities that come with it. What we may not fully grasp is that we are making vows to Christ and the Church – vows that are exciting but also demanding, vows that should be seen as red flags warning us that struggles and challenges lie ahead.

In my previous pastorates I have known successful people in two different vocations – specifically, doctors and schoolteachers – who told me something quite astonishing. Looking back on the career choice they made many years earlier, they said that if they knew then what they know now, they would never have entered those professions. The doctors had become disillusioned by the tangled web of health insurance and the constant threat of malpractice suits. They felt that caring for patients had taken a back seat to the business and legal side of medicine. The teachers had become discouraged by their loss of authority and lack of parental support. They no longer felt fulfillment and joy in educating their students. I've been suggesting that a lot of married folks go through a similar process of disenchantment and reach this same conclusion. "If I knew then what I know now, I would never have gotten hitched to this person in the first place." This really shouldn't be surprising, because marital vows are made in the abstract, before couples face concrete reality. When reality sets in, the promises that are made can become very difficult to keep.

Now, let me ask you to look back on your initial decision to follow Jesus Christ and belong to the Church. If you knew then what you know now, would you still make the same decision? If you knew at the outset that following Christ means not just putting on a crown but

taking up a cross, would you still be willing to sign the dotted line? If you knew ahead of time that belonging to a church doesn't just involve lighting candles in a lovely Christmas Eve service, but also sitting through tedious committee meetings that last beyond 9 o'clock on a weeknight, would you still choose to belong? To put the question most directly, if you knew then what you know now about the Woodbury United Methodist Church, would you still affiliate with this congregation?

Most of us go through "seasons" in our relationship with Christ and the Church which are similar to the seasons of marriage. In the beginning, we are madly "in love" – but then things happen; and as the writer of Revelation puts it, we "lose the love we had at first" (Revelation 2:4). We lose some of the passion we once felt for Jesus himself; we're surprised to discover that some of Jesus' followers are flawed human beings who can be petty and disagreeable; we experience conflict within the church that is just as gut-wrenching as the conflict we experience outside the church; we learn that being a committed church member can be hard work and sometimes a real drudgery. Soon enough, our promises to be faithful recede into the mist of memory. A commitment that starts out with white-hot passion becomes lukewarm or cold. It's enough to make us say, "The vows of Christian discipleship and church membership are harder to keep than I first thought. And so, knowing now what I didn't know then, I need an opportunity to renew my vows."

Well, this morning you and I will have that very opportunity. On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we remember the vows of obedience that Jesus made at his baptism – vows which he steadfastly kept (Matthew 3:13-17). We also remember the vows our parents made for us if we were baptized as infants, and we remember the vows we made ourselves if we were later confirmed in the faith or were baptized as youth or adults.

This day reminds us that as Christians and church members, we have "promises to keep and miles to go before we sleep." Few of us understood the full import of these promises when we first made them, and none of us has kept them perfectly. But here's the good news: in the light of our lived experience as followers of Christ and members of the Body of Christ, we're invited to renew these promises. And, what's more amazing is that this invitation comes not from a pleading preacher or a needy church; it comes directly from God. The God we worship is always the God of the second chance, the God of forgiveness and rebirth, the God of a new creation. When you and I keep our promises half-heartedly or even break them altogether, God is there is not only to remind us of our promises, but also to help us remain faithful to them.

I've long since lost touch with the couple in Texas who asked me to officiate at the renewal of their wedding vows. I've often wondered what their married life has been like since then. I'm guessing that it's been more of the same – some peaks and some valleys, some harmony and some conflict, some commendable behavior and some regrettable behavior – hopefully, more of the positive than the negative. But I know this for certain: the ceremony I conducted for them bode well for the future of their marriage. After 25 years together, this couple understood more fully the significance of their vows, and they exercised the wisdom and courage to renew them.

Friends, whether you've been a Christian and a church member 25 months, 25 years, or more, or less, today is a good time to pause, re-examine your faith commitment, and do a re-set on it. You have the opportunity to say, "Yes, the honeymoon may be over, but I'm in this for the

long haul, through thick and thin. I'm committed to Christ and the Church "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until we are parted by death" – and are then reunited in a life that transcends death.

That's the wonder of it: God promises that the time will come when there will be no more fatigue, no more apathy, no more discouragement, no more bickering, no more conflict, and no more separation in Christ's Church. All of God's people will be reconciled and made whole; and this will be God's doing, an act of God's unmerited grace. You and I may be fickle about keeping our vows, but God always remains faithful to God's vows. This is why, when you dip your hands into the waters of the baptismal font this morning, I will say to you: "Remember your baptism and be thankful."