



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

I Will, with God's Help (3)

Sermon for Pentecost 4, June 12, 2016

Readings: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:15; Psalm 32; Galatians 2:15-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

Sermon text: Celebrant: Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? *People:* I will, with God's help. *Celebrant:* Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? *People:* I will, with God's help. (Baptismal Covenant, Book of Common Prayer, p. 305)

This is the third of three sermons on the five promises of the Baptismal Covenant.

As you read the last two questions asked in the Baptismal Covenant, note a subtle difference between the focus of concern: all **persons** (“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”), and all **people** (“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people”). Also note that the focus remains exclusively centered on human beings, whereas today we may think our covenantal responsibilities extend also to respect the dignity of every living creature and indeed the integrity and worth of the planet and its natural systems.

So, as I read the questions, the former asks of us a concern for the individual, the latter of the nations and communities of all earth’s people and creatures.

The verbs are active and morally loaded: seek, serve, love, strive, respect. These are not passive or neutral promises. We, the people who make them, are hereby committed to an active life of service and struggle, including the struggle to love others as ourselves. That alone takes a lifetime of practice, to enlarge our perspective and sympathy, to see as if from another’s eyes, to overcome our natural propensity toward self-love and self-interest above others. Consider also the idea that we are to seek out Christ in all persons. Of course we would serve them if we saw them as Christ-like (lovable, noble), but is that so easy? No, it takes an effort of the imagination to see a homeless person, unwashed, unhinged, unlike—until we see that she or he is me (but for the grace of God) and she is Jesus and he is my neighbor not a stranger, and we are both equally beloved of God, and equally lost without mercy and hope (but for the grace of God).

We are all in this together. As Jonathan Daniels put it, “We are indelibly and unspeakably one.” All people, all creatures and God in Christ, held together in the unity of the Holy Spirit. A unity born of God which has somehow been broken in this sinful world. A unity and harmony that God commissions us to help restore. And so we are baptized into God’s mission of reconciliation, restoration and new creation. So we will say in our post-communion prayer, “And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord.” (BCP 365). The call is reiterated in the dismissal, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” The liturgy is over but the service has just begun.

An example of what it means to love in service is well known to many of you. Margaret Fettes died last week, surrounded by her family, at peace with God and in charity with the world. Even close to the end, when I visited to say some final prayers, she managed a smile, she squeezed my hand, she could whisper the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

Margaret always led with a smile. Her energy and attention was always focused on the person in front of her, and on the needs of family and community and country. For 26 years she served as the New York State Assembly person from this district. Community and family service committee are those she always gravitated toward. She knew everyone’s name and address. She was made for the job—and to sell Avon Products—her other work!

But mainly she tried to spread cheer. In the nursing home, severely restricted in her motor skills, speech and some cognitive functions, Margaret nevertheless managed on most days to get to the community room and sit in a corner making seasonal greeting and get well cards. She was the “mayor” of Ten Broeck Commons. She always had a smile on her face. Because she truly loved her neighbor. And she loved God—and sang in the choir from childhood till nursing home—over 75 years! That’s a lifetime of prayer and praise.

Now Margaret is particularly on my mind as I prepare for her funeral, but she is not alone. We live in a world in which peace is shattered in many parts—and even in our country where a single heavily armed madman or terrorist can wage death in the name of whatever distortion of good or God he (usually) can use to rationalize his fear and hatred—as appears to have happened last night in Orlando. In such a world it is all the more important to unify people of all faiths and good will and strive for justice and peace for all people.

On a planet in which millions of species—including our own!—are endangered by human-caused climate change—we can work to amend our wasteful ways and begin to create a more just and sustainable world.

How? By starting small. We are reading as Vestry a book by Eric Law entitled *Holy Currencies*. In a chapter on the “currency” of relationships, the author quotes research that demonstrates that each of us has a circle of influence of at least 3 degrees: our friends, the friends of our friends, and the friends of our friends’ friends. If each of us influences at least five friends, and each of them has five friends and so on, a church service that influences 100 people can have an impact on 10,000. That’s pretty much everyone in a rural place like this. It works both ways, from them to us and us to them, and it can work for good or ill, as when a wave of suicides sweeps through a small town, or terrorism infects a world religion. It can work for good; indeed small acts of love and kindness multiplied a million ways are even now fighting against the forces of darkness and hate.

Who will win? God knows. Some of you have heard me tell this parable that I heard from a priest in Puerto Rico during a youth mission trip there. He was talking to the kids about how to deal with anger and hate, as well as the desire to do good and to love—the kind of thing Jesus taught us to do. He said there was a native American saying that each of us has two wolves fighting in our heart, the wolf of hate and the wolf of love. Which one will win? The one we feed.

Seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself. Strive for justice and peace among all peoples, respecting the dignity of all living beings. Start there—with this vow, in your heart. Move out and join forces with others—your friends and their friends and their friends' friends. Who knows but that pretty soon we will have a movement on our hands. Just like what happened in the first century, with the Jesus movement. Still going strong. Sign up or re-up today.

Let us pray: Dear Lord, open our eyes to see your face in that of our neighbor and your work in our struggle for justice and peace. Teach us to respect all living creatures and this wonderful creation you have given us to care for.

In Christ's name, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY