

Sermon for Proper 21, Holy Baptism
September 25, 2011
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We hear a lot of promises, don't we? They are all over the place. We may even make a lot of promises. The words, "I Promise" slide so easily from the mouths of some people that the words that follow may be forgotten just moments after they're spoken.

For others, those words are so weighty that they won't promise anything for fear that they won't be able to fulfill the promise. I once attended a wedding where the couple, well aware of the statistics regarding their chances for an enduring marriage, made their vows, not "for as long as we both shall live," but "for as long as we both desire." For people like them, a promise is a heavy, serious thing.

Sometimes, those words are used to express certainty, as in "It's TRUE! I promise!" And a broken promise is often seen as a failure. Some of us have experienced a broken promise as betrayal, especially if it was made by someone we love or trust.

Perhaps, a promise is something to strive for; something important enough that it is worth the work of trying to fulfill it. If there is no risk of failure, the promise is trivial. And if there is no possibility of success, it may be simply self-deception. Some promises, even those to ourselves, are so deep and heavy that we know we cannot keep them through our own power, our own strength, our own will. We turn to a community to support us or to hold us accountable. At times, probably not often enough, we call upon God to be with us, to give us the strength and the will, the perseverance to keep the promises we undertake.

In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, we make weighty promises; promises that take a lifetime to fulfill. In just a short while, we will baptize Grace... As we do, we will remember and renew the promises we made at our own baptism or those that were made for us.

Grace's parents and godparents will make promises that it will be up to Grace to keep. It's no small thing to make promises that another must keep.

Promises like putting her whole trust in Jesus' grace and love and following and obeying Jesus as her Lord. They will promise that Grace will continue in a community of faith and in worship, that she will repent and return to the Lord whenever she falls into sin; that she will proclaim the Gospel, that she will serve Christ in all persons, that she will strive for justice and peace.

That's pretty big stuff for such a little person.

But there are a couple of pieces of Good News. First, she has a lifetime to do it. Second, she doesn't do it alone. As a community of faith, we are all striving to live those same promises. And we promise to support her (and each other) in her life in Christ.

The work of living into these promises leads to a way of being in the world; a way of being in relationship with others; a way of being in our own skin.

It's a way of being that Paul writes of in his letter to the Philippians when he writes, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." Translators suggest that he is imploring them (and us) to be who they already are in Christ.

This is what all those promises we make at Baptism add up to: A commitment to continually strive to be who we already are in Christ Jesus.

Paul reminds the church in Philippi of what they already know; what they have already experienced: encouragement in Christ, consolation from love, sharing in the Spirit, compassion, and sympathy. This is what comes from sharing in the mind of Christ and allowing Christ to work in us and through us - to be who we already are in Christ.

He goes on to remind them that it also requires humility; it means that they put the interests of others above their own; the common good over personal selfish ambition.

This may seem to be a tall order if it means constant perfection.

But Christian living is a process, not an event. It's a lifelong transformation; a journey that we take in the company of others and in the companionship of Christ.

At the end of today's reading, Paul offers this encouragement, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure." You see, it is not only us making promises in Baptism. God is the agent in this as in any sacrament. At Baptism, God, too, makes promises.

To fulfill our Baptismal promises is at one and the same time an act of will on our own part and an act of letting go of will of allowing Christ to work in us and through us until our mind is the same mind as Christ in us; until we can truly be who we already are in Christ.

And then, as Paul writes, our joy is complete.

This, Grace, is what is promised for you today at your Baptism: that you will be who you already are in Christ and that your joy will be complete. Thanks be to God!