

# Holy Vows and the Firstfruits of Worship

## Readings

Deuteronomy 26.1-11

Psalm 100

Romans 12.1-6

Luke 21.1-4

## Opening

The great American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said, “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime.” That quotation has become a maxim of sorts for me, a way of showing me true north. I want to spend my days with efforts that are worth doing, and I need the sobriety that worthy efforts will take more than a lifetime.

For the better part of this decade, I’ve been pursuing this true north by going south. Not metaphorically, no shocking confessions today, I mean *literally driving south on I-75* to Holy Cross Cathedral in Loganville, Georgia. Once a year, the clergy of our diocese renew ordination vows at Holy Cross Cathedral in the presence of our bishops and the gathered laity of the diocese. The spiritual preparation intensifies when I-75 becomes I-285 around greater Atlanta. Pastors renewing their vows are tempted to use words pastors ought not say. I-285 on an Atlanta Friday is an excellent example of the Anglican belief concerning purgatory, expressed by the Right Reverend NT Wright, “Yes, we believe in a purgatory, but only in *this* life, not the next!” So there’s Dante reimagined for the 21st century on I-285.

When I reach my destination in the calming Nave of Holy Cross Cathedral, just as I did a few days ago, I see the words I professed on August 20, 2008, when I was ordained a priest. I see the holy vows worth doing, vows I won’t fully achieve in this lifetime.

I can only renew my vows in the same way in which the Word became flesh and dwelt among us—full of grace and truth. In the moments preceding this renewal, I must tell the truth to myself in these vows—both how I have been faithful with God’s help, and how I have fallen short of the glory of God. I’m much more aware of how I have fallen short. This is holy service to the Holy One we’re talking about. I must confess my sins and renew my vows in grace. Nothing worth doing should be attempted outside of grace. And when I renew my vows in the presence of grace, I can safely face the truth of who I am and who I aspire to be as a priest.

But the one thing I don’t ever want to change are the vows themselves. Don’t change the standard. These vows keep me more than I keep them. They inspire me to press on towards greater faithfulness. Here is my true north. (Even when it means driving south into the teeth of I-285 traffic.)

## Holiness with Grace and Truth

It has become our custom in recent years to take a Sunday in November to meditate upon our commitment to the work of Christ at Apostles. As a kid and teenager, I remember hearing about an upcoming stewardship or commitment Sunday and thinking, ‘this is going to be *superbly* boring today.’ That’s because I rarely heard about a deep call to holiness when we talked about commitment or finances. It was more often a fundraising drive, not a real sacrifice in worship to the Holy One. Which probably explains why I used to be allergic to speaking about money. But when I meditate on holiness I realize you must speak about financial gifts. Yet financial gifts alone do not holiness make. I speak of holiness in commitment which means we aim for wholeness. Holiness requires wholeness. Faithfulness cannot be measured by finance alone.

So today I want to consider a holistic sense of commitment, rooted in three commitments, or to use the biblical word, first fruits—presence, service, and giving. God deserves our first presence, first service, first gifts. These are commitments we established in our Apostles’ member covenant, they are principles of Anglican discipleship, but most importantly, these are commitments rooted in our baptismal vows.

I come to these topics, addressing you as Apostles' rector, in the same way I approach the renewal of my ordination vows. Just as I face uncomfortable truths about myself, I need to tell the truth about how we need to grow in faithfulness as a church. My family knows that I'm one who prefers we talk about the elephant in the room. I discuss 'the elephant in the room' because I love my family and I don't want to be anywhere else. We face the truth of things, but all in the environment of grace and the pursuit of holiness. We belong to one another and we desire to become all God desires us to be for His glory.

## Israel at the Borderlands

We come to these topics hearing the commands of Moses in Deuteronomy before they entered the Promised Land, the land of rest. Deuteronomy is basically a long sermon preached on the borderlands. Before you enter the Promised Land, Moses declares, make your covenant vows of holiness before the Lord God. The Lord brought his people to the land of rest, a fruitful land of milk and honey, where he would be their shepherd and bring them peace. When the earth produced its harvest, God commanded each household to bring the first fruits that they harvested, offering it back to God. Here is the biblical basis of the tithe. What we often miss is how the firstfruits, the tithe, is rooted in worship, the story of God's deliverance, and God's rest. Return with me to page 167 as we meditate on firstfruits together.

## Presence

In verses 2-3, Moses gives instructions to make an offering, but those instructions require not only giving an offering, but presenting an offering. There's a difference. You've got to be present to present the offering. And Moses gives a liturgy for the presentation of the gift. Say to the priest (at the house of God), "I declare today to the Lord your God that I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our fathers to give us."

There's a longer liturgy that follows in verses 5-10, but let's pause here for a moment. The first act of worship is always presence, presenting ourselves to God. The first sacrifice, the first vow we make is our presence. The first act of the liturgy is gathering as the Lord's

people. Paul said much the same to the Roman church: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Now consider this biblical theology in light of recent data, some general to American life, and others particular to Knoxville.

In 2013, the Barna Group determined that Knoxville was the most Bible-minded city in the United States, according to Bible reading and study habits, etc. Three years later a church attendance survey said that 19% of Knoxvillians attended church on a regular basis. That’s quite the contradiction isn’t it? But it’s even more stark when you drill down to the changing definition of what an active church participant means in American churches. Twenty years ago an active church participant attended a church gathering—whether on site or in homes—three times a week. Today, an active church participant is defined by attending church 3 times a month. This means that we understand that active church members will be absent 12 Sundays a year, an entire quarter of the year.

Apostles isn’t immune from this reality and our attendance patterns attest to this reality. We will fall short of the standard, but we cannot change the standard of what faithful presence—the firstfruits of our presence requires. Deuteronomy 26 and Romans 12 give us the biblical basis for the first fruits of our presence in worship.

Here’s the standard we trust as Anglicans for presence in Sunday worship, a statement included within the canon law of our diocese and a norm that we inherited from Anglicans over the centuries: ‘It shall be the duty of every layperson in this Diocese to worship every Lord’s Day in a church unless reasonably prevented.’ Here is sound wisdom, understanding that times of illness, caring for family members and neighbors, may prevent us from worship. We have times of vacation, too, but even on vacation we should be present for worship in a church. Presence in worship is the first fruit we offer to God.

I have no reservations saying that if you call Apostles your church home, then worship at Apostles should be the first fruits of your personal or family calendar every week. “Do not be conformed to this world” Paul instructed the Romans. That especially means our calendars in our time. I pray Apostles would be the place of first fellowship for your

calendar. That doesn't mean fellowship always happens here at 1540 Robinson Rd. Table Groups, Bible studies, and Apostles prayer groups gather regularly throughout the city.

Here's the conviction I have often shared with our staff and Vestry over the years regarding our parish calendar. We do not want to create a cluttered parish calendar. We don't want there to be so many events that you're unavailable from neighbors and non-Christians friends. We believe in the importance of solitude and family time. We're seeking to be a parish that has a wise rhythm in the calendar of gatherings we offer.

But here's the thing about giving the firstfruits of your presence in 2019: many weeks you won't *feel* like coming to worship, to Table Group, or Bible study.

Not long ago I looked at my weekly calendar and saw Table Group and said, 'I just want to stay home tonight.' I love the friendships in our Table Group. It had **nothing** to do with our group and everything to do with how tired I felt. But what do I do? I'm the pastor who has preached about the importance of neighbors, eating together, creating friendships across the generations. So I go with my family. And you know what happens? I eat a good meal, I hear some good stories, I pray for others, they pray for me. I even stay a bit longer than I planned because the conversation is so good, the friendships growing. I walk home strengthened in spirit and *even in body*, so much stronger than if I had just stayed home. I have felt the same on some Sundays, too. What do you know? I'm human. But the pursuit of holiness calls me on. Presence in worship comes first and fellowship is vital for our spiritual well-being.

## Service

Also vital in the holiness of our commitments is the firstfruits of our service. When I lead our Discovery Course I share Apostles values in the acronym of SHALOM, the 'L' representing Liturgy. I always explain that our value in liturgy is not just orderly, scriptural, and sacramental worship. Liturgy literally means 'the work of the people.' Which means that worship calls for our participation, our service.

For the past three months, you've heard us request volunteers for our volunteer teams. Our volunteer teams on the whole are pretty thin, even after our round of trainings and sign-ups,

but there was one team that raises particular concern for me. We had **two** volunteers to sign up to serve in our children's ministry.

You have heard me say on several occasions how my heart beats for our church to be a place of inter-generational friendships. And it *is* happening even though our children's ministry volunteers are really few right now. I see older couples supporting younger couples in these stressful years. I see church members bringing meals to parents after childbirth, helping with babysitting, attending birthday parties. I can give a witness that the Apostles village has helped rear my two children. I see a broader picture than the Sunday morning hours.

But there's something about Sunday when we're specifically worshipping and learning about Jesus and his Kingdom. Somehow we must become more present with our children in *their* learning spaces on Sunday. I love the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd that we offer for our kids each Sunday. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd teaches a contemplative way of learning about the stories of Jesus, the traditions of the faith, the liturgy of the Church.

A few summers ago I went to their room to experience what a Catechesis hour is like and it was one of the most peaceful, calming hours you could experience. I think what's happening in these little rooms—'atriums' they are called—may be a Catechesis into the gentler, peaceful rhythms of the Kingdom, a way of preparing our kids for Kingdom faithfulness in the age of noise and chronic busyness.

Over the years our volunteers corps in this ministry have been parents, paid childcare workers, and only about six volunteers who are *not* blood relatives of the kids. We can be more present on Sunday mornings.

A few weeks ago I spoke about what Paul meant when he said to Timothy "I have kept the faith." Paul not only kept the right teaching of faith, he kept the faith in tact by passing it on to the next generation. He was present, he walked alongside Timothy.

Every time an infant is baptized, the priest addresses the congregation to make a vow to God, "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?"

All of our volunteer teams need more support. But here is one that has a specific vow connected to it. And the one with the vow has the **greatest** need among all our ministries right now.

There is something so important about children's and student ministries, especially in a small church. It can be difficult at times when your youth group doesn't offer have dozens of friends. It can be difficult when your children's ministry is smaller. This is not a plea for mega-growth. That's not our vision. But when you're smaller, the older friendships matter so much more.

I am the product of a small youth group and I'm thankful for it. Two Anglican rectors came out of my old youth group—Aaron Wright and myself. But you know, we relied on older friends in Christ, volunteers who served the Lord with the firstfruits of their time and their presence.

We are a church of about 200 people. We are a household of faith, a liturgical house. And that means each one shares the work of the whole people. Our member covenant calls each member to serve in the ministries of the church. We ought not to depend upon those who are serving on 2, 3 or more teams to address our current needs. We are a church family and everyone in the household is called to share in the work of the Lord's house. If we share the work of the people across 200 members, we won't have volunteer shortages and we won't burnout our volunteers.

## Commitment and Renewal in the Age of Exhaustion

I am fully aware that just about everyone hears this message after an utterly exhausting week. And if you've had an exhausting week I suspect that is probably the norm, not just for you, but for most of us. I wouldn't be surprised at all if 80% or more of us admitted that we felt overwhelmed by life most Sundays we're here. Today is not a day to unpack the sources of our exhaustion. That is a very important topic and the answer definitely concerns technology but it's much bigger than technology. Between work demands, financial

pressures, family obligations, family conflicts, dozens of inboxes and messages, our accelerated world threatens to engulf us. It's a daily burden.

But remember the story of Israel. Return to Deuteronomy 26.5-10. When an Israelite brought the firstfruits to the altar, he told the story how God saved his people from hard labor, how he brought them to a land of rest. We are learning how to be a Sabbath people here because our Lord is the God of peace and he brings us to a place of rest.

In the midst of our daily overwhelm, the Book of Common Prayer gives us wise words from the Daily Office. The Collect for Peace begins "O God, the author of peace and lover of concord, to know you is eternal life and *to serve you is perfect freedom...*" Renewal in the age of exhaustion comes from knowing Christ, belonging to his Church. Freedom and peace actually comes by *servicing Christ*. Engagement and service play as much a role in renewal as practicing Sabbath rest.

## Gifts

When we come to the end, we consider the material firstfruits, the first gifts of our tithes and offerings. We teach a biblical tithe of giving our first 10% to the Lord's work in the local church because of Scriptures like we read in Deuteronomy. But it's not just a command. It's not a God tax. This is an offering we make because of our story. That God delivers us, provides for us, leads us to eternal life and rest.

We never had to set up chairs in a facility like most church plants do when Apostles was planted in 2006. God provided this church home for us. Not unlike when God prepared a land for his people Israel. I believe he meant us to be a first of all a place of worship, but also a place of rest and healing, and a place of service. We rented this building for the better part of a decade, but we purchased this church house in 2013 not only for ourselves, but to serve our neighbors, our community. When you tithe you support all the ministries of the church. When you give to the building fund, you make it possible for us to host ministries like Restoration House here for next to no cost.

I look at the faithfulness of giving, not just this year, but throughout the years, and I'm so grateful for the faithful and sacrificial giving at Apostles. This is who we have been and I pray we always remain a parish of generous giving.

## **A Time for Renewal**

For the past several months we have devoted most Sundays to the question what does it mean to be the Church? We've listened to that question in series from Colossians, Hebrews, and most recently, 2nd Timothy. You know what? I'm glad to be meditating on what it means to be the Church at Apostles Anglican. I know I've shared some tough topics today, but my goodness, I love this church. Apostles is a wonderful church. I want us to be all that God would have us be. That's why I share this call to holiness in our commitment to the church.

As Anglicans any commitment to Christ and his Church begins with baptism, the sacrament of God's grace. In a moment we will renew our baptismal vows, our call to holiness. But before we do we're asking for you to take a few items to prayerfully consider how you'll offer your firstfruits to God in the coming year. You can return the pledge card anytime between now and December 1st. The booklet is yours to keep, to place in your Bible, as a reminder of your commitment to the Lord's work. We renew our vows, we pledge our selves to the Lord, we pursue holiness, knowing his grace alone makes our faithfulness possible. In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.