

A Sermon by the Rev. Canon Jack Frederick Nietert on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 30, 2011 at the Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Reaffirm

If you were baptized in an Episcopal Church prior to 1979, chances are you, or your godparents and sponsors answered a series of questions. Two of these are: "Dost thou believe in Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God?" and "Dost thou accept him and desire to follow him as thy Saviour and Lord?" If you were baptized in another church the questions would have been similar.

If you were baptized in an Episcopal Church since 1979 you or someone speaking on your behalf would have responded to a series of six questions. Two of these questions are: "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?" and the other one is "Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?"

Well, these are the fundamental questions at the heart of the Christian faith. The response to each of these questions is, "I do." Two little words...Wow! But they aren't really the answer. The real answer is how we choose to lead our lives in light of such a powerful promise.

It's easy to accept Jesus as our Savior. No matter what goes on in this world, no matter what goes on in our lives, we've got a Savior. We've got God saying to us, "I love you. I care about you, I have rescued you. I want to be with you for all time and eternity."

That's good stuff, that's the Gospel. But what about the promise to follow and obey Jesus Christ? We've made that promise to God...How good is our promise?

Fortunately our God is not like us. Our God is known for his steadfastness. When we break the promise, God continues to fulfill the promise. Everyone of us wants a Savior, but few really want a Lord—a master—and so the reality is there are times when we do break the promise and God invites us to renew the promise again and again and again.

In the Gospel of Matthew the first words that Jesus says to Peter and Andrew are: "Follow me." In John's Gospel the last words that Jesus says to Peter are: "Follow me." And those are the first and last words out of Jesus' mouth—"Follow me." What does it mean to follow Jesus? I want to suggest to you that it takes a lifetime to answer.

To follow means to come after or travel behind. We do this most often when we don't know the way. Our Christian faith and experience tells us that Jesus is with us, leading us on right paths all during our lives. Scripture quotes Jesus saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life." In Greek, the "way" is literally the "road" on which we travel. And so Jesus not only guides our feet but he is the road on which our feet tread.

To follow also means to learn by example. I think this is what is meant by the Phrase, "To grow into the full stature of Christ." In today's New Testament reading (1 Thessalonians 2:9-13), Paul says, "...lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory."

Well, following is one thing but how about the obey part? As we said, "Everyone wants a savior but no one wants a lord." To obey means to listen carefully and then to act. Obedience to God begins with our intentional effort to discern God's will in our lives and continues with our reliance on God to live out that will.

I was reminded of a wonderful old story about following and obeying. It was about Charles Blondin the famous French tightrope walker crossing Niagara Falls. It is a great story illustration of what true faith is.

Blondin's greatest fame came in June of 1859 when he attempted to become the first person to cross a tightrope stretched over a quarter of a mile across the mighty Niagara Falls. He walked across 160 feet above falls several times, each time with a different daring feat - once in a sack, on stilts, on a bicycle, in the dark, and once he even carried a stove and cooked an omelet! On one occasion though, he asked for the participation of a volunteer.

A large crowd gathered and a buzz of excitement ran along both sides of the river bank. The crowd "Oooohed!" and "Aaaaahed!" as Blondin carefully walked across one dangerous step after another— blindfolded and pushing a wheelbarrow. Upon reaching the other side, the crowd's applause was louder than the roar of the falls! Blondin suddenly stopped and addressed his audience: "Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?" The crowd enthusiastically shouted, "Yes, yes, yes. You are the greatest tightrope walker in the world. You can do anything!"

"Okay," said Blondin, "Get in the wheelbarrow....." The Blondin story goes that no one did! (Later in August of 1859, his manager, Harry Colcord, did ride on Blondin's back across the Falls.)

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We call Jesus many things – friend – brother – teacher – savior – lord. We promise to follow Jesus as our Lord. How does "lord" differ from the other titles for Jesus? A lord is someone in a position of authority and respect. In the Gospel, the Greek word "lord"—kyrie—can also be translated "sir." When we promise to follow and obey Jesus as our Lord, we acknowledge that Jesus has the authority to direct our lives.

How do we live out that promise in our everyday lives? How readily do we live out that promise in our community of faith? And most importantly, how readily do we allow God to fulfill God's promises in us which in the end, allow us to fulfill our promises?

Next Sunday, the Bishop will be here and I hope you will be here at 4:00 p.m. and bring every relative and friend and colleague you can find. We need to make an important statement to the Bishop and we can best do so by filling every seat in this building. But that is an aside.

Next Sunday I will invite those are being confirmed to stand. Next I will invite those who wish to reaffirm their baptismal vows to stand. That is your chance. If this is a moment of renewal for you, if this is a time for you to say, "Yes, I need to do that." Stand up!

The Bishop will then ask all those being confirmed—confirming the baptismal promises made at baptism—and all those wishing to reaffirm their baptismal promises corporately, "Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil? Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?" We will then recite the Apostles Creed and prayers will be offered for all. Following that the Bishop will confirm those being confirmed and then one at a time the Bishop will lay his hands on the heads of those reaffirming their vows and pray, "May the Holy Spirit, who has begun a good work in you, direct and uphold you in the service of Christ and his kingdom."

I urge you to consider next Sunday as a time of personal renewal and a time of renewal for all of the St. Mark's Chapel family.

Amen.