

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Our baptismal promise for this morning is

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as yourself?”

In our Gospel this morning

we hear one of the most often cited passages of the Bible,
John 3:16 –

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.”

This statement has a lot to say

about the baptismal promise we are exploring today.

We all know this line so well,

that perhaps we no longer think much about it.

It is often used like a battering ram, or a club,

to batter those who don't believe into submission.

Since I don't feel this is an especially healthy

or appropriate way to gather converts,

I thought it important to pause

and take some time to look a little closer at this passage.

First, I want to take a moment

to break open the first part of the phrase;

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...”

When I first heard this phrase

I thought it meant, “God loved the world so much

that he gave his only Son..” meaning that the giving of God's Son
was an indication of the intensity or extent of God's love.

Imagine my surprise when I learned in seminary,
in a class on Johannine scripture,
that the meaning of the phrase was more like
“God loved the world so; he gave his only Son,”
or “God loved the world in this way, he gave his only Son,”
and so the giving of the Son for the world
is not so much a superlative,
as it is a simple description of the way that God acts.
I know it seems a small difference at first,
but let it work on you.
This change forces us to look at Jesus,
not as a one time only extra-special event
that somehow changed the rules of the universe,
but as an event that in one moment
made clear to us in new and extra-special ways,
the love that God has always had for us,
and always will.
I know that I will now lose some of you
as you wander off, metaphorically speaking,
to wrestle with this new reality, and that is fine. I understand.
For the rest of us, I will move on.
I want to spend a little time contrasting the difference between will and may.
When we listen to John 3:16 with our memories instead of our ears
it is easy for us to hear
that belief will lead to eternal life
instead of that belief may lead to eternal life.
It would be nice if belief was all that was needed, but it isn't.
The light of Christ coming into the world
allows us to see the difference between the light and the darkness,

and so belief gives us the ability to choose one or the other,
but it doesn't make that choice for us.

We still must choose to come to the light.

That is what free will is all about.

Now, I want to talk a little more about the word belief,
and how that word has changed over time.

When the Gospel was written, almost 2000 years ago,
we had a different understanding of belief.

That difference is causing us trouble now.

The original definition of belief,

and one I would very much like to return to,

is belief is something that you give your heart to.

This means that when the Bible was being written,

belief was a matter of the heart and not of the head.

Our problem today comes up

because we live on the other side of the enlightenment and the reformation
and because of that,

belief has wrongly been pushed out of the heart

and is now thought of as something managed by the head.

A brief example of how the problem presents itself.

Every so often,

with my history as both a scientist and a priest,

I get asked if I believe in evolution.

My response is no, but not for the reason you might think.

I don't believe in evolution,

because I don't believe in any scientific theories or laws.

Science and the scientific method are not about belief,

they are about facts.

I don't *believe* in evolution,

but I have absolutely no doubt
that the theory of evolution is the most valid description
of how life on this planet grew, changed, and differentiated
over the course of time.

The data overwhelmingly supports this theory.

If, however, new data comes to light that invalidates this theory

I will throw it out without a moments hesitation.

That is the way of science when done correctly.

Do I believe in God?

Ahhh... Yes! I do believe in God.

Do I have proof, data to support this theory of God?

Absolutely none. But it doesn't matter.

God is not a theory, God is.

I give my heart to God and that is enough for me.

All the data in the world cannot make one believe or disbelieve.

It is the wrong tool for the job.

So, on to our promise for the day.

“Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as yourself?”

At the core of this promise lies an unstated belief.

The belief that Christ resides in all persons,
that Christ is there to be found, and served in everyone we meet,
whether they believe it or not.

This is a profound way to approach the world
and all the people who live in it.

I dare say this separates us from many other faiths,
and I am sad to say,

from many of our nominal Christian brothers and sisters.

When we begin all our interactions with those around us

on the premise that Christ is there to be found, and served,
it truly changes the way we behave, or at least it should.
Further, when we promise to seek and serve Christ,
we recognize that finding Christ in others may not be easy,
any easier than it is to be Christ to others.
Christ in the other must be diligently sought out.
Christ in the other may be buried deep,
May even be unknown to them,
yet still Christ is there.
To serve that Christ,
the one buried and unknown
can be difficult indeed.
It is this dynamic, the Christ residing in us and in others,
that empowers and enlivens the commandment
to love your neighbor as yourself.
This understanding of Christ residing in the other
comes to us out of the Celtic Christian DNA,
buried deep in our history,
that was so much a part of the early formation
of the Anglican and Episcopal tradition.
It is also, I believe,
one of the great gifts that Anglicanism has to share
with the Christian world at the very least,
if not the whole world at large;
a Christian witness offered free of arrogance,
that listens at least as much as it speaks.
A force of true reconciliation, and not division.
An offering of loving-kindness to the world.
That is, at least, my hope.

So, “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,
loving your neighbor as yourself?”

I will, with God’s help!

Amen.