

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 3:15-17,21-22

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

January 9, 2022

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

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What is your highest duty?

When we approach the subject of baptism, as we do today, the answer should be quite simple. Our highest duty should be to God and to Jesus Christ. To our faith into which many of us have been baptized.

When we speak of duty, a lot of things can get convoluted into the discussion...because we also have strong ties to other important commitments in our lives...to our families, to our jobs, to our country. You might also name things like duty to a political party, a local volunteer organization, or a favorite sports team. It is true that we have a duty to support countless things in our lives. In fact, you might have multiple higher duties, but you can have only one highest duty.

I want to spend our time this morning thinking critically about what that means for us...what does it mean to claim Jesus Christ, to claim God, to claim our faith, as our highest duty?

Let me state it for the record...this can be a challenging conversation. It may make some of you uncomfortable but let's approach the subject with an open and willing heart this morning. Because I believe we are at a critical cross road...a cross roads of division that has been fueled by our various higher duties. And perhaps, we have too often chosen a path that has forgotten the values and actions that our baptism calls forth within us...those values and actions that are our highest duty above all others.

You all have a handout this morning. (If you are watching online, you can find the attachment in our morning post that went out on FB and through email.) On one side is our Baptismal Covenant from our Book of Common Prayer. On the other side is an interpretation of this covenant in the form of a prayer. First, I want you to look at the Baptismal Covenant and make note of the actions that are outlined for us.

We begin by claiming who we believe in...God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. That sets the foundation for our faith. And then, we name the kind of person we commit to being. We commit to growing in our faith. We commit to turning away from sin and asking for forgiveness when we do sin. We commit to sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ through our words and actions. We commit to loving our neighbor. And, we commit to working for justice and peace and respecting everyone's dignity...no matter who they are.

Said another way, we commit to a life of faithful practice where we will do our best in all situations to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. We will especially strive to love one another

so that every single person can live securely. That means we are going to help each other. And we won't discriminate or withhold our love and care from those with whom we disagree.

Because, this covenant doesn't single out one group over another. It doesn't give preferential treatment based upon your other duties and commitments. This covenant only answers to our highest duty...no matter your political affiliation, your gender, your skin color, your sexuality, or your nationality.

I suspect, however, that this is where we find the rub. When we have relied upon your higher duties...the ones that give us our individual security and fulfillment. When we set aside what should be our highest priority because it puts at risk the secure box we have built for ourselves. So, if you feel a rub, that's OK...but it might indicate that it's time to look deep within our hearts and assess where and why we are not living our highest duty.

When might that be for you? Where have you chosen a higher calling over the highest calling we have as Christians? As you think about your answer you might feel yourself getting a bit anxious or defensive. Because the answer we know in our heart may reveal some difficult truths that we have ignored for a while.

But, we have a choice as covenant people to live as we have been called to live. To address those difficult cross roads. Because to be covenant people, we must live out a communal commitment to work together, and yes, at times, that means we have to give up some of our own security for the greater good, to set aside our various duties to seek the direction of our baptism.

As I look around at our world right now, I realize that I can't sugar coat this message to make everyone feel good. It's not going to feel good for everyone. Letting go of some of our higher duties for the sake of the highest one is downright scary. It means we have to reevaluate some of our choices, how we spend our money, what causes we support, what information we take in. It means asking ourselves...Are the things we are doing and saying and believing a reflection of covenantal living? If not, it's time to do some soul searching.

Like many of you, I feel scared and unsettled at the world we are living in. So many things are coming at us from all sides and we want so badly to defend what we feel is right. We want to put a protective shield around us so that we don't have to think critically about the difficult things we face. We narrow our focus. We shut out other ideas and opinions. We put the world into boxes and we shut the door because we are so scared to trust any other boxes.

But, I want you think about what you are giving up by living in a single box. Think about this image...

In his commencement address to Georgetown University in 2011, Paul Farmer, whom some of you may be familiar with through his work with global health initiatives, referenced an idea

called the *Adjacent Possible*.<sup>1</sup> Farmer himself has dedicated his life to tirelessly work for the wellbeing of others at great cost to his individual security. He starts with this idea that to repair the world we first must be willing to look at the larger social world around us and understand the past that it was built upon, what got us to where we are, and notice even the uncomfortable parts. That means taking time to learn about and understand our problems, our triumphs and our connections. And then, we are to look critically at what we have learned about the world and about ourselves and ask questions. Get curious. And finally, Farmer tells us to be determined to serve others, to work for the greater good of all people.

Put together, these steps help us to achieve what Farmer refers to as the *adjacent possible*. Farmer quotes from writer Steven Johnson,

*“The strange and beautiful truth about the adjacent possible is that its boundaries grow as you explore those boundaries. Each new combination ushers new combinations into the adjacent possible. Think of it as a house that magically expands with each door you open. You begin with a room with four doors, each leading to a new room that you haven’t visited yet. Those four rooms are the adjacent possible. But once you open one of those doors and stroll into that room, three new doors appear, each leading to a brand new room that you couldn’t have reached from your original starting point. Keep opening doors and eventually you’ll have built a palace.”*

In other words, we can never, ever get to the solutions we seek in our troubled world if we aren’t willing to give something of ourselves, to open new doors, to stretch our understanding, and to be brave enough to commit to the highest duty that will allow us the courage to keep opening doors.

I love the idea of the adjacent possible and I think our baptismal covenant is built upon the same assumption. Because, you can’t follow this covenant just when it’s convenient or when it supports your individual interests. Christ didn’t intend for us to claim our baptism and then stay in a box of our own making. To stay in your own little box in your own little world, frightened of what you may lose or too attached to what you think you deserve will never achieve a better world.

If you are uncomfortable with these ideas, that’s OK. I’m not asking you to agree with everything I am saying. What I am asking is for you to think wholeheartedly about your highest duty. I am asking that you consider where you have built a box around yourself and refused to open doors. I am asking you to re-read your baptismal covenant. Let the Holy Spirit speak to you and guide you to those places where you can open a new door and then another and then another so that your life becomes the vision of hope that God intended. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Weigel, Jonathan, editor. *To Repair the World: Paul Farmer Speaks to the Next Generation*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2013.