

“Keeping Our Word”

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

The musical *Guys and Dolls* is playwright Frank Loesser’s adaptation of Damon Runyon’s short stories concerning gangsters, gamblers, and other characters of the New York underworld. Along with such memorable songs as “Luck Be a Lady Tonight” and “Sit Down, You’re Rocking the Boat,” the show’s dialogues features Runyon’s unique dialect that mixed highly formal language and street slang. Some of the dialect is so specific to its times that many productions of the musical include in their program a dictionary offering definitions of its such as a “marker,” which is a slip of paper that functioned much like an I.O.U. However, a marker help much more integrity – it was a person’s word and honor on the line. If someone were to “welch” on a marker – go back on one’s word or fail to keep a promise – their reputation would be ruined. In the words of Nathan Detroit, a marker is *“a pledge that a guy can’t welch on. It’s like not saluting the flag! My marker’s as good as gold.”*

Keeping one’s word and having a good reputation among one’s peers was critical in the world of the characters of *Guys and Dolls* – but sadly, that isn’t always the case in our world. Too many of us have been betrayed by people who promised that they would be trustworthy and would keep their word of promise; on too many occasions, people have “welched” on a promise, but unlike the world of Nathan Detroit and Sky Masterson they do so without any remorse or fear of consequences. We have become increasingly skeptical of the words of promise made by people; we want contracts and other forms of guarantee that a promise made will be a promise kept, that the one making the promise will also keep their word.

Today’s Gospel lesson is a section of Jesus’ Farewell Discourse in the Gospel of John, where he is offering teachings to his disciples as to how they will continue his ministry after his departure. These teachings have including his assurance that *“in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places ... and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also”* (14:2-3) and the promise of the gift of the Advocate, John’s name for the Holy Spirit, *“the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.”* (14:17). These promises are accompanied by instructions as to the identity of Jesus’ disciples, how they are to be distinguished from others; specifically, the difference between Jesus’ disciples and the world is precisely the love that consists in faithfulness to his word:

- “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.” – 14:23-24.

Jesus’ words are a response to a question by one of his disciples, who asks our Lord *“how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?”* Jesus’ answer makes it clear to all who would be his followers that it will be through their faithfulness to his Word that he will be revealed to others. The love of God in Jesus will be revealed to the world through the lives of Jesus’ disciples who will keep his Word in both hearing it and living according to it. As instructed them earlier in the discourse, *“if you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* (14:15).

- “Keeping’ God’s word meant internalizing the teachings of *Torah* to the extent that they shaped every aspect of one’s daily life. It meant living in harmony with God’s truth and God’s justice, with God’s love and God’s mercy.” – Alan Brehm.

Keeping our word to be faithful to God’s Word remains at the heart of the identity of those who have been gathered together to be the Church of Jesus Christ. As we celebrate Confirmation this morning, we are reminded that it is through Holy Baptism that we are “*reborn children of God and made members of the Church which is the body of Christ.*” It is through water and the Word of God that this holy sacrament “*brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the words and promise of God declare.*” (*Small Catechism*). While baptism is a one-time event, it has implications for the way we live every day as people of God:

- “Therefore let all Christians regard their baptism as their daily garment that they are to wear all the time. Every day they should be found in faith and with its fruits, suppressing the old creature and growing up in the new. If we want to be Christians, we must practice the work that makes us Christians, and let those who fall away return to it... As we have once obtained forgiveness of sins in baptism, so forgiveness remains day by day as long as we live, as long as we carry the old creature around our necks.” – *Large Catechism*.

The true sign that we are God’s people is if we are “wearing our baptism” in the way we live our lives in accordance with Christ’s teachings and expectations. It means keeping our word to the one who has kept his Word with us, being faithful followers of our Lord, whose faithfulness is steadfast and sure. A church that seeks to be faithful in keeping the Word that has been entrusted to it is a community that is truly the Church of Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God’s presence here and now.

- “Relationship with Jesus does not depend on physical presence, but on the presence of the love of God in the life of the community. And the love of God is present whenever those who love Jesus keep his commandments, when they continue to live out the love that Jesus showed them in his own life and death... The insistence of these verses on love as the sign of fidelity to Jesus and the way to communion with God, Jesus, and the Paraclete suggests that the believing community in any generation will enter into relationship with Jesus only when it takes on and lives out the love of the incarnation.” – Gail O’Day.

Our “marker” as Christians is how faithful we are to the Word that has been entrusted to us, is we are indeed walking “as a child of the light.” The integrity of our Christian lives, the authenticity of our identity and witness, is rooted in our faithfulness to the baptismal promises that our confirmands affirm today and that all of us must affirm every day: “*to live among God’s faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper, to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, to serve all people, following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.*” As we celebrate the confirmation of our young people today, all of us pledge that together we will “*give praise to God and bear God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world.*” If we are faithful in keeping this word in all aspects of our life together as the people of God, then we are truly the Church that Christ established “*to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). If, on the other hand, we fail to keep our word, then our gatherings seek to be those of a Church, and our witness is to something other than God’s love in Jesus Christ. A community that seeks to truly be the Church of Christ knows that its marker must be in knowing that “*we have no mission but to serve in full obedience to our God; to care for all, without reserve; and spread God’s liberating word.*” (ELW Hymn 729).

- “There must be living works and the evidence of love, as the words ‘keep my words’ mean. That refers to a love that fights and overcomes. For it is the nature of true love to do all things for the sake of the beloved, and there is nothing too hard for her to suffer and to bear that she would not do with joy... This means, then, not only hearing the Word with joy, but holding on to it firmly and winning the victory.” – Martin Luther.

When Jesus’ followers live in love and thereby keep Jesus’ word, they experience the love of God, and it is through that love that they also experience the indwelling of God and Jesus. Faith in Jesus leads to the disciples’ full communion with God and Jesus in the Father’s “dwelling place” (14:2-3). To love Jesus is to live with God and Jesus – to enter into a relationship with them, to come home: *“The abiding presence of God and Jesus within the community is thus both the foundation and the result of the community’s love.”* (O’Day).

I recently found a photograph from my Confirmation Day that brought back a lot of memories of when I promised to keep my word and be faithful to my baptismal promises in front of family and friends in my home congregation in New Jersey. I know that I was absolutely sincere when I made those promises, but I also know that I haven’t always lived up to what I sincerely intended that day. I haven’t always loved God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength; and I certainly haven’t always loved my neighbor as myself. While I do regularly attend worship, it might rightly be stated that I don’t have a choice; as a pastor, that’s my job! I haven’t been faithful in serving all people following the example of Jesus; in fact, more often than I care to admit I’m looking out for myself more than others. I do proclaim the good news of God in Christ in word (again, that’s what preaching is all about) – but deed? And how regularly have I striven for “justice and peace in all the earth”? One of the wise guys in *Guys and Dolls* could rightfully accuse me of “welching on my marker” – and what would that say about my integrity as a Christian, as a baptized child of God?

The truth is that none of us can keep our word to be faithful followers of Christ on our own. That is why there is a second critical element in Confirmation: when the pastor’s hands are laid on each confirmand’s head and a prayer is offered that God will stir up in each of them the gift of God’s Holy Spirit: *“the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence both now and forever.”* As the gift of the Holy Spirit inspired the first disciples to proclaim the good news on the day of Pentecost, we believe that through the empowerment of the Advocate, God’s Holy Spirit, we will be able to *“accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or achieve”* (Ephesians 3:20). It may be impossible for us to fully keep our word to be faithful to our Lord’s call, but *“for God all things are possible.”* (Matthew 19:26).

- “When our love for God and for Jesus Christ truly define who we are, then our lives will be public display of what it means to keep God’s word. Fortunately, it’s not a do-it-yourself project. Jesus promised the disciples that ‘the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and will remind you of all that I have said to you.’ With the Spirit’s help, we can live a life of keeping God’s ways, which means a life of fulfilling our promise to follow Jesus. When we keep our word in that way, then we can truly demonstrate a new and different way of living to the world around us.” – Brehm.

Our marker isn’t written on a piece of paper; it’s in our minds as we receive God’s Word, in our hearts as we treasure this wondrous gift, and in our lives as we embody God’s love to others. In keeping our word to be faithful to God and steadfast to God’s Word, we will walk as children of the light and bear the good news of Jesus Christ to all, so that all may know that Jesus love all the children of the world. Amen.