

Last week I shared that there were three components of a commitment necessary to be present and follow thru or it ceases to be commitment. Those three components are a public statement of intention for what you fully intend to do in action, explicit indication of a specific time and date to begin taking the intended action and complete the intended actions, and do the intended, signed up for actions as promised to completion. The first component is the core of our focus today and that is declaring commitment. Let us note that the second component often closely aligns with the first, for when we declare our commitment officially there is an outlined or at least implied duration of time in which the commitment is focused.

All of us declare commitment to something at some point in our lives. Think of commitments you have made. We make promises to friends and family. We commit to schools and teams and clubs and jobs. We sign agreements to purchase or rent a home, car, open a bank account or get a credit card. Most of the time those declarations are verbalized to another party or group of others. Sometimes they include nonverbal actions like signing on the dotted line and shaking hands.

Historically, various religious traditions also include declarations of commitment: i.e. piercings, tattoos, circumcision, a drop of blood, initiation practices, to name a few. These actions were, and still can be today, crucial to declaring allegiance and loyalty to others within that group who were also seeking to follow a particular way.

For Christians, baptism is our main declaration of commitment. For John the Baptist and Jesus, who sought to teach the early Israelites the new way of living for Christ and following Christ’s way, baptism became the pinnacle of devotion. We celebrate today that baptism is the sign and seal made on the human heart and life by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit bringing those baptized into unity with Christ. We celebrate with the act of baptism the cleansing and purification of sins as well as a grafting into God’s family. Therefore, when we present ourselves or our children for baptism, we are declaring commitment to this sign and seal on our hearts and lives. And in case you were wondering, the duration of time in which this commitment is made is our lifetime. Our baptism does not expire and therefore our commitment to God does not expire.

To celebrate the sacrament of baptism, there is what I will call the trinity of declaring commitment. First, there is the act of being present and stating verbally our profession of faith in Christ as Lord. Second, there is the act of baptism which includes prayers for the Holy Spirit and water. Third, there is the declaration from the pastor that you are now a child of the covenant. Where these practices derive is no coincidence. They were each embodied at Jesus’ baptism.

Think now about the text in Luke we read a moment ago about Jesus' baptism. In verses 16 and 17, John the Baptist declared who Christ is and his faith in Christ. John says to the crowd, "one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize with Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." What John says is that Jesus is the One in whom our hope belongs, for Jesus is the One who will deliver us. Jesus is why John was there and why all those people are there. Jesus is why we are here. In verse 21 then, Christ presented himself in the river and after he came up out of the water the sky opened and a dove, the Holy Spirit, descended. In verse 22 then, we hear God declare "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased."

The baptism of our Lord is a powerful foundation for us in understanding the importance of declaring commitment. And our own baptisms, as declarations of commitment, define and mark promise, covenant, devotion, and loyalty to Christ and Christ's way. No matter how complicated life may become, we are never to forget whose we are.

In an article entitled *The Power of Declaring Commitment* Dr. Mike Patterson offers his thoughts on what helps make commitment stick. He reflects and writes, "The Founding Fathers understood something significant about commitment: Publicly declaring your intentions creates momentum – and accountability. It's a powerful act because it's hard to renege on that kind of force. My national study on commitment in the workplace affirms this idea. I found that there is something special that happens when people publicly declare their commitments. In fact, 75.6 percent of respondents reported that they are more likely to follow through on a commitment when they tell others what they are going to do. In other words, a public promise is a stronger promise. When we give our word – out loud, in person – we are more likely to fulfill our promise. It's one reason marriage vows are often taken before family and friends; that declaration of love and fidelity cannot easily be recanted when everyone you know was a witness."

Dr. Patterson then offers thoughts on how to best spark a higher level of commitment in those you work with. I will add that in the church that is all of us together. He says, "Harness the power of commitment by giving employees the opportunity to publicly share the commitments they make, giving learners the opportunity to share what they intend to do with their newfound knowledge or skills. Doing so can be a defining moment when someone stands before others to deliver on an outcome. These commitments can then be solidified through periodic updates and status reports."

Each of us is to consider the commitments we make. The commitments we make to Christ and Christ's church. The commitments we make to our families. The commitments we make to our friends. The commitments we make to our careers or clubs or whatever it is we are doing. Telling others what we're going to do will help to strengthen our resolve to fulfill our promises.

Responding to the Word in Practice

In honoring the power of declaring commitment, the celebration of Ordaining and Installing Elders and Commissioning Spiritual Growth Leaders and Teachers is in order. Each will be done separately.

Ordination and Installation is another act in the life of the church which symbolizes the power and presence of the Holy Spirit descending upon us, dwelling in us, and living through us. We mark this celebration with red as we do in celebrating Pentecost, the day in which the Holy Spirit filled the church with life and purpose as told in Acts 2.

The Ordination and Installation of Elders in the church is at its core a declaration of commitment. It requires presence and profession of faith, prayer, and pronouncement. The call to serve as an Elder is focused within a three-year term, although to be ordained is a lifetime commitment flowing alongside our baptismal covenant.

As we celebrate with the ordination and installation of one new elder, Elsie Howerton, and the installation of two previously ordained elders, Matt Foster and Gary Williams, I pray we will hear their commitments to Christ and Christ's way as they serve the church at this time. I also pray they will, both individually and collectively, celebrate in their declaration the incredible opportunity and responsibility it will be to live into the fulfillment of their commitments.

As Dave Tate, our Clerk of Session, makes his way to join me for this part of our worship, I want to share that we have a unique opportunity today to do things a bit different than normal because of unique circumstances. Matt Foster, who carries a significant role in our local hospital system, will be joining us via FaceTime. Despite the complex nature of his work posing a significant challenge for him being with us in body, Matt remains committed to Christ and Christ's way for the church and plans to make his commitment this morning virtually as a sign of that. I respect both Matt's position and commitment and believe, even though it is not quite the same, we can still effectively celebrate the fullness of our celebration of Ordination and Installation together.