

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

July 30, 2023

St. John's Episcopal Church

The Rev. Kara Wagner Sherer

1 Samuel 9:1-3, 15-18, 10:1

Acts 13:16-23, Matthew 4:1-11

This week I feel like I have immersed myself in lots of different worlds.

Last Sunday afternoon we went to see the movie *Oppenheimer*, and I thought about what it was to be in Oppenheimer's world, literally a village built so that the scientists, engineers, cooks, teachers, and secretaries were locked in a village as they developed the atomic bomb.

The next day we saw the *Barbie* movie, and we were again immersed in a different world, Barbie World, full of pink plastic, and then Ken World (that's not too much of a spoiler alert!); but also between those two worlds and the real world.

Ironically, this week the readings we have from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are all about God's World, or at least humans trying to make God's World in this world. As we know from the Hebrew scriptures, God's first plan is to make God's World in the people of Israel; they are God's World. They are aided by laws and by judges and prophets, and when that isn't working anymore, they choose a king, though God warns them what might come with that, and so they try out the world of inherited monarchy.

In Acts, Paul is very keen to convince the Jewish people of his time that Jesus is indeed part of this inherited monarchy, that as the prophets said, Jesus comes from the tribe of Benjamin, and is descended from David.

But, when we get to the Gospel reading, we discover that Jesus wasn't so interested in the world that we humans have created and have attached to what we think God wants. Jesus is willing to reject all human-created worlds. Jesus wants to upend this world and remind us that who is really in charge is God. We refer to this as the "Kingdom of God" or the "Reign of God"; in Wednesday Bible Study we have been calling it "The God Project".

Jesus is confronted with the ways in which we make these human-created worlds. First -- and I like how David Bentley Hard translates the word "devil" as "slanderer" -- because that is what temptation comes from: the lies we tell ourselves, the lies which the world tells us about what we need and what we want, and what will bring us fulfillment and joy. The first temptation is the material world; bread, to have our needs met, and that's done in our world through wealth. Jesus rejects the Wealth Project for the God Project.

In the second temptation, the Slanderer takes Jesus to the pinnacle of religious authority, the temple, and asks him to perform a magic trick that will make everyone look to Jesus, and consider him a religious authority, an influencer of the time. Jesus rejects the power of religious authority and the culture of influence.

Finally, the Slanderer shows Jesus all the dominions of the world, the inherited monarchies, the democracies, the communist systems, the socialist systems. The slanderer shows him Oppenheimer's world, Barbie World, and Ken World. Jesus rejects them all. He rejects political power.

So if none of these things help us to achieve the God Project, how do we live in this world? How do we labor with God to bring about the reign of God? How do we work on the God Project?

Fortunately, today we are renewing our baptismal vows, as we baptize Amelia, Violet, and Josephine into the Christian community. In the five promises we are about to make, we explain and demonstrate what it means to be Christian in this world.

The first one is that we promise today to **be together**. The promise that we will commit to this community; that this will be our chosen family.

The second promise we make is to **be truthful** with ourselves and with others, and when we mess up, which we will do, we will work together to make it right.

The third promise: we promise to **do truth**; not just tell the truth, but to show the truth through our words and our actions.

The fourth promise we promise is to **be love**. To remember that love is not just a feeling, it is action.

And, finally, in the fifth promise we promise to **do justice**. This is where the Christian rubber hits the road.

I'm grateful for a blog by Sophia Campos¹ who collected some of the quotes from bell hooks' book *all about love*, because I think she takes these five promises – to be together, to be truth, to do truth, to be love, to do justice – and succinctly summarizes them.

About being together, bell hooks says “we do not have to love, we choose to love.” We choose to be part of a community of love.

¹ https://mijente.net/2017/05/all_about_love/

About truth, bell hooks says “when we can see ourselves as we truly are, and accept ourselves, we build the necessary foundation of self-love”. How can you love others as yourself if you do not first love yourself?

bell hooks reminds us to do truth in word and deed. She says, “the heart of justice is truth telling.” A reminder that those in the world who want us to forget the past and ignore present realities are not telling the truth. We must look at ourselves and our community in truth.

Finally, we promise to do justice. bell hooks says, “there is no love without justice”.

That is a huge calling for this small group of people. But we are lucky today, because we are welcoming three new Christians into the God Project, and along with them come ten godparents and parents, and we are spreading the God Project, we are rejecting the lies of wealth, and influence, and power, and signing up for a life of truth, and love, and justice. That is the world I want to live in.