

Renounce

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction

This Sunday we begin a new five-week series, *Our Baptismal Vows*, walking through the promises at the heart of the United Methodist baptismal covenant one Sunday at a time. Most of us made these promises once, or had them made on our behalf, and we've rarely looked at them closely since. We start where the covenant itself starts: with renunciation. To renounce is to turn away from the powers that diminish us and to choose, again, who we'll serve. The good news is found in God's grace: in Christ there is no condemnation, and the Spirit sets us free, so choosing God again is possible because we have already been freed.

In our lives, all of us serve something. If we look at any person's calendars we'll see what that person trusts to keep them safe, what that person hopes will make them feel like they're enough, what they're afraid to lose. At Shechem, Joshua gathers the people. He is near the end of his leadership after leading the Israelites into Canaan and is giving his final words. He pushes for a decision: "Choose this day whom you will serve." In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he writes that the Spirit of life is at work in us, giving life even to bodies that are dying. In reading these texts in parallel, we are invited to take an honest inventory of the gods we actually serve, and turn once again toward the One who has already claimed us in full.

Illustration Video

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZ9OR_S1OXw

In this clip from Moana (2016), Moana comes face to face with a raging lava monster and recognizes who lies beneath the fire.

Why This Video?

The creature raging in front of Moana is the island's own source of life, hollowed out after her heart was stolen, and the fury on display is both terrifying and heartbreaking. While everyone else sees a monster to get past, Moana sees the fear and grief that lies beneath the surface.

With this wisdom, Moana does the opposite of what anyone might expect. She sets aside the instinct of opposition, and opens the way to close contact. When she is close enough to press her forehead against the face of the monster, she reminds Te Kā who she is, indeed that Te Kā already *knows* who she is. When she does, the shell cracks and falls away, and what's left is Te Fiti, a peaceful mother island who restores greenery and life to the world.

Video Discussion Questions

1. Moana stops fighting and walks toward the very thing everyone else is either fighting or running from. When have you moved toward something frightening instead of away from it? What do you think made that possible?
2. Moana looks at the raging monster and seems to see something else. When have you sensed that someone was covering something vulnerable with their anger? What did you think was really going on? What did you do?

3. Moana tells the ocean, "Let her come to me," removing her own protection, and closes the distance herself. Why do you think she takes the first step instead of waiting? When have you taken a first step instead of waiting?
4. The turning point for the monster comes with the words "This is not who you are. You know who you are." What do you think those words might mean for someone who hears them? When has someone reminded you who you are in a moment where maybe you'd forgotten?
5. Moana presses her forehead to the monster's. What do you interpret from that moment of closeness? What does it take for someone to let their guard down like that?
6. The hard, burning shell cracks and falls away, and underneath is one who brings life. When have you watched someone soften to reveal who they were all along?
7. Once she is restored, the land turns green again around her. What does it tell you that when she is restored, everything around her comes back to life? Where have you seen one person's restoration bring life to others?

Joshua 24:14-18 (NRSVue)

¹⁴Now therefore revere the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. ¹⁵Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

¹⁶Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods, ¹⁷for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went and among all the peoples through whom we passed, ¹⁸and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God."

Romans 8:1-11 (CEB)

¹So now there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ²because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³God has done what was impossible for the Law, since it was weak because of selfishness. God condemned sin in the body by sending his own Son to deal with sin in the same body as humans, who are controlled by sin. ⁴He did this so that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us. Now the way we live is based on the Spirit, not based on selfishness. ⁵People whose lives are based on selfishness think about selfish things, but people whose lives are based on the Spirit think about things that are related to the Spirit. ⁶The attitude that comes from selfishness leads to death, but the attitude that comes from the Spirit leads to life and peace. ⁷So the attitude that comes from selfishness is hostile to God. It doesn't submit to God's Law, because it can't. ⁸People who are self-centered aren't able to please God.

⁹But you aren't self-centered. Instead you are in the Spirit, if in fact God's Spirit lives in you. If anyone doesn't have the Spirit of Christ, they don't belong to him. ¹⁰If Christ is in you, the Spirit is your life because of God's righteousness, but the body is dead because of sin. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your bodies that are dying through his Spirit that lives in you.

Scripture Study Questions

1. Joshua tells the people to "put away the gods that your ancestors served" and to choose whom they will serve. Before we get to the obvious idols, what are the smaller gods you actually serve day to day, the ones that shape your calendar and your to-do list? What priorities do these show? Does anything surprise you?
2. Joshua doesn't leave the choice in the abstract; he answers for himself: "as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." Why do you think he commits out loud, and in front of everyone? What changes when a choice like that is spoken publicly?
3. The people respond by remembering their story: God brought them out of Egypt, protected them on the way, and cleared the road ahead of them. How does remembering what God has already done shape your ability to choose God now?
4. Paul writes that "there isn't any condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." How does starting from no condemnation change the way you take an authentic look at your life? What do you think could be possible when you no longer fear being condemned?
5. In the CEB, Paul sets a life "based on selfishness" against a life "based on the Spirit," and says the two think about different things. Do you ever notice yourself choosing selfishness? In what way? Do you ever notice yourself choosing the Spirit? What helps you turn it toward the Spirit?
6. Paul says the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead lives in us all, and gives life to bodies that are dying. What could it mean to you that turning from old powers is something God's Spirit does *within* us, rather than a project we can finish on our own?
7. Joshua calls for a decision, and Paul insists the freedom to make it is already given. How do these two passages fit together for you? Where do you feel inspired to respond to these passages this week?

Weekly Action

This week, make a list of what your calendar and/or to-do list show and what this might say about your priorities. Next to each one, ask yourself: Is this really a priority? Is it something I want to keep doing? If it's hard, consider talking it through with a family member or trusted spiritual partner. Be sure to take time for prayer, and listen for how God might be inspiring you to make a change. After a few days, prayerfully consider any change you may have made and what resulted from that change—even if it's small! Think about sharing your experience with that same family member or trusted spiritual partner, and think about how this small experience might inspire you for another step toward God's inviting grace.

Prayer

God of the burning bush and the parted sea, you who go before your people and clear the road home: we come to you with conflicted hearts. We have served gods too small to save us, and we are ready to turn to you. Free us from old allegiances: the need for artificial safety, to look a particular way, to pursue the illusion of control. Set our feet on the road that leads to you. Pour your Spirit into these bodies of ours, into tired hands and anxious minds and guarded hearts, and make us alive with the life that raised Jesus from the dead. Give us the honesty to see what and who we serve, and the courage to choose you again and again. And when we falter, meet us on the road, and bring us home. Amen.

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