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“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”

That's one of the questions that we answer when renewing our baptismal covenant. On the surface, the question seems simplistic ~ and rather uncomplicated.

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” “Sure! No problem!” But I submit to you that this particular baptismal promise is *not* simplistic. And in fact, when *applied* to some of our life's different circumstances and contexts ~ this promise can become quite complicated.

So ~ how *can* we simplify this baptismal promise in such a way that we can apply it to our lives as baptized Christians? I'd like to suggest that we begin by imagining a triangle. A triangle, of course, has three points: as does this particular baptismal promise. So imagine a congruent triangle in front of you ~ and at Point A, located on the bottom left, put a sticky note that says “Perseverance”. For God's expectation of Christians, on a daily basis, is that we are going to try our best to persevere ~ that we will actively *resist* the temptation to do anything that causes alienation of ourselves from God and from one another. Point A: Perseverance.

At the very *top* point of the triangle, I'd like you to put a second sticky note. And on that note, write the words, “I am going to mess up from time to time.” If you don't have enough room, just write the initials “F.H.B.” ~ *fallible human being*. Because *that* is exactly what we are. We *admit* as much when we use the word “whenever” in this

baptismal promise. “Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, *whenever* you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?” By using the word “whenever”, we acknowledge that, despite our best efforts, God *knows* that we are going to mess up from time to time.

Why? It’s what we do. Point B: Fallible Human Being.

Finally, at Point C, I want you to put a third sticky note that says “Repent and Return” ~ or “R&R” for short ~ (as in, “I’m going to church for some R&R.”) *This* part of the baptismal promise means that when we *recognize* that we have messed up, that we will turn *away* from that behavior and ask God and each other for forgiveness.

So there we have our triangle and our three stickies: “Perseverance”; “F.H.B.”; and “R&R.” Now let’s apply our triangle to the life of Simon the Pharisee. Simon, you remember, was hosting the dinner party to which Jesus had been invited ~ and, for *whatever* reason, Simon had not extended to Jesus the common courtesies expected of a host. He did not make provisions for having Jesus’ feet washed; there was no anointing; and there was no customary kiss of greeting. But Simon’s lack of protocol is *not* what causes the tension in this story. What causes the *tension* is the entrance of ~ “a woman of the city”. For those of you who are wondering, “a woman of the city” is...a biblical colloquialism.

Now ~ from Simon’s point of view, if Jesus was *really* a prophet, he would *know* what kind of person this woman was and would have had nothing to do with her.

Because *Simon’s* understanding of righteousness ~ Simon’s understanding of what it meant to persevere in resisting evil ~ meant the total rejection of this woman ~ even in the face of her repentance. Now if the scenario were *different*, Simon’s reaction would

have been quite correct. If the woman, for instance, had come to his house to solicit him or his guests ~ if the woman had brought *temptation* into his home or into his life ~ Simon would have been quite right to persevere in *resisting* that temptation and *expelling* it.

But that wasn't the scenario, was it? The scenario was that the woman, whom Jesus *knew* to be a sinner, was in the act of returning and repenting. Yet whereas *Jesus'* understanding of righteousness was to move *towards* the woman and to meet her repentance with forgiveness, *Simon's* understanding of righteousness was to keep his distance.

In essence, Simon was *stuck*: he saw his *repudiation* of the woman as a mark of *his* perseverance against sin. As a result, he didn't realize that his *judgment* had caused him to slide from being one who was persevering in resisting evil ~ into the sinner's corner of our triangle. Until Jesus brought it to his attention, Simon didn't recognize that *he* had a need to repent himself ~ a need to return to God for some R&R.

It's not hard to imagine scenarios where we can become like Simon. Recall two weeks ago, when Israeli commandos boarded a flotilla of Palestinians bringing aid to the Gaza strip. In the aftermath of that event, including the recent resignation of the journalist Helen Thomas, we read commentators who see the Israelis as being the perpetrators of evil, no matter what the Palestinians do ~ and at the same time, we read pieces from commentators who see the *Palestinians* as being the perpetrators of evil, no matter what the *Israelis* do. For Simon the Pharisee, issues were black and white. And when we *insist* that issues in our world are always black and white, then it is indeed

possible for us (like Simon) to become so zealous in our quest for righteousness, that we indeed wind up separating ourselves from God and from one another.

Now, for just a moment, let's apply our triangle to the "woman of the city". When we first meet *her*, we realize that she has *already* recognized the moral failings in her life. And so *the woman* begins, not at Point A (Perseverance), but at Point B (the recognition of her moral failure). And as a result of her recognition of her failings, she repents ~ that is, she moves to Point C and asks Jesus for forgiveness and for restoration.

Now here's the question: after granting the woman pardon, Jesus tells the woman to "Go in peace." *Go in peace...where?* Where does this woman go to find support and healing and instruction ~ what community does she turn to that will help her persevere in living a forgiven life? In other words, where does this woman go to find Point A (Perseverance)? The religious institution that Simon the Pharisee represented had deemed her unclean and unfit! And if she returns to her former environment, she is most likely to fall again. So where does she go?

We are not told what happens to the "woman of the city". It's simplistically tempting to think that she left Simon's house, and went and sinned no more. Then again ~ it's simplistically tempting to think that, after confessing *our* sins, we also will go and sin no more. But we do. And we know that we will. And *God* knows that we will. Because of this, I can't help but wonder if Jesus did not invite the woman to join the group that was following him on his journey ~ a group that, as our reading points out, included several women. Perhaps Jesus invited her to follow him and to be a part of that community ~ a community in which she could learn perseverance.

In similar fashion, when you and I recognize our own failings ~ and when we repent and ask Jesus to restore us ~ we, too, have discovered a very valuable truth: being a part of a supportive, faithful Christian community ~ being a part of Christ's Church where God is always, always present ~ is one of the greatest helps that God has given us in our quest to live our baptismal life on a daily basis. Because we know that we *need* God's preserving help as we try and daily live a baptismal life ~ we return here. We return to what Christ created. We return to life with God: a life of prayer and sacrament, a life of fellowship and learning, a life that is lived within the company of the faithful ~ a company that has accepted God's invitation to be in relationship with Him.

And that, my friends, is what our triangle is all about. We know that we need God's help to persevere against evil. We know that we need God's help to identify those areas in our life in which we have grown apart from God and apart from one another. We know that we need God's help to restore us and to forgive us when we come to Him in need of grace. And we know that we need God's help in persevering as we begin the process all over again. A baptized person's relationship with God is not linear, insofar as a person is to go from point A, to point B, to point C, and then stop! A baptized person's relationship with God is ongoing. We go from point A, to point B, to point C, to point A ~ and we, like the Energizer bunny, keep on going and going and going....

Thus the good news is this: no matter where we are in life right now ~ point A, point B, or point C ~ God is here to help move us along. God is present in this faithful, supportive community ~ and He will help move us from point to point to point, over and

over again, continually throughout our lives ~ as we share with Him an ongoing, never-ending, always loving, baptismal relationship. Amen.