

## “THE BAPTIZED COMMUNITY”

Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7

January 10, 2021

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For the second time in as many weeks I found myself remembering a scripture incorrectly. The first time I was reading the story of the wise men in Eugene Peterson’s translation called the *Message*. I noticed that the wise men did not in fact seek Herod out. They did not look for the new born King of the Jews, Jesus, at the palace. They were summoned by Herod after he had heard rumors of strangers looking for this newborn King. I was certain that Peterson had gotten the facts wrong in his paraphrase, but when I looked it up in the version we usually read in worship, I discovered that I was the one who had it wrong. I would not normally be disturbed by this except I’m certain that somewhere in my history of preaching that story I made a big deal of that fact.

Well, I did it again this past week. Sometimes, I begin to think about the scripture for Sunday’s sermon before I actually look it up. This is especially true with a familiar text, like for example, the baptism of Jesus. We’d already decided that we’d focus on the baptized community this morning and I’m mulling over some ideas in my head. The story in Mark focuses on Jesus and the story in Acts describes new disciples being empowered by the Holy Spirit. So I think a nice thematic sentence would go something like: “The baptized community listens to Jesus and is empowered by the Holy Spirit.” The first part will be simple because the voice from the cloud says, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well-pleased. Listen to him.”

So I kind of know where I’m going when I sit down to write the sermon. I look up the text, you know, to find some supporting ideas for my direction. I notice that there’s some material that might help distinguish between the baptism of Jesus and the baptism of John. That’s a nice link to the Acts passage. And I read on looking for the words I expect to see at the end. And I see that they’re missing. The voice doesn’t say, “Listen to him.” And I think, how odd, I never noticed this difference in Mark’s version, so I look up Matthew. They’re not there and when I looked in Luke, the words weren’t there either. And then I realized what I’d done. I’d mixed up the story of the transfiguration with the story of the baptism. In both places, the voice declares that “This is my beloved son, but the command to listen to him is only in the transfiguration.

I wouldn’t of course be telling you this unless the mistake somehow worked to make my point, or more accurately, my new point: Baptism isn’t about listening to Jesus. In the first place, Jesus hasn’t said anything yet. In the second place, there’s something odd about Jesus being baptized by John, whose baptism we are told is about repentance. Matthew’s version of this story wrestles with that very question, “What need had Jesus to be baptized, since, he had nothing to repent of?” In essence, Matthew tells us that the proper form had to be observed. Even Jesus had to follow the rules.

But Mark isn't bothered by any of it because, I think, the baptism of Jesus doesn't follow form. It isn't a baptism of repentance. God says to Jesus, "You are my beloved. In you I am well-pleased." Words spoken to Jesus and heard by Jesus before he begins his ministry. They are words of assurance, of love before he takes up his task.

When we baptize someone in the church today, we speak words of God's love. Whether we are baptizing an infant or an adult, the love of God stands at the center of the sacrament. Love stands at the center of the baptized community. When we look at another human being, if we do not see a child of God, loved by God, then our vision is failing.

It's so easy to go blind in this life, even within the community of faith. People disappoint us, irritate us, and sometimes hurt us deeply. It's not so easy to love these people. We are more likely to call down God's judgment upon them as the psalmist does on his enemies. But this is not how it is in the baptized community. We don't have to wait for Jesus to tell us, "Love your enemies... turn the other cheek... give them your coat as well... walk the extra mile." We just need to remember our baptism, to remember God's words, "You are my beloved."

Of course, love doesn't just excuse bad behavior. Love provides the energy and motivation to address the wrongs, not just walk away from them. To begin with the love of God is not to wipe away the necessity for repentance in the walk of faith. If anything, being loved by God, makes us more accountable, not less. In Jesus' baptism, the Spirit descends on him in the form of a dove. When Paul encounters disciples in Ephesus who know only about John's baptism, he baptizes them in the name of Jesus and they immediately begin to manifest the Spirit. The baptized community is loved by God and empowered by the Spirit.

It's been a rough week in Washington to say the least and the coming week is not likely to be any easier. The work of accountability is never pleasant, but often necessary. As congress reconvened when security had been reestablished, I was struck by two speeches that I think have relevance for the baptized community. When Mitt Romney called on his colleagues to "tell the truth" as a way to begin the healing, it seemed to me to be an important thing for the faith community to hear. It took a lot of women telling the story of hurt they felt when the church said it couldn't use their gifts before the church began to reexamine its doctrine and practice of excluding women from ordained ministry. When men and women began to speak the truth about the love for a person of the same gender, their love for God and their call to ministry, the church was slow to respond. The healing isn't complete by any means, but it couldn't have started without these courageous truth-tellers.

I did not expect to be moved by Lindsay Graham. It was the closest thing to repentance that I've ever heard from a politician. He spoke truth. His words and tone expressed regret for any role he may have played in encouraging the events of the afternoon, and he called on his colleagues to stop sowing dissension. I don't expect Senator Graham to change his agenda or political philosophy, but his confession and call to repentance says

something to those in the baptized community who have disrupted the peace of the faith community for their own personal gain.

To those who suggest that we just need to drop everything and come together, I want to say, that solution has never worked well in the church. We must always return to the love of God, to see in one another a child of God, but when we have harmed the community of faith, change didn't happen without accountability. The baptized community is loved by God, but it is also inspired by the Spirit. We live into our calling by the grace of God, but also with the help of the Holy Spirit. Among the manifestations of the Spirit in the disciples at Ephesus was the gift of prophesy. The prophets in scripture speak in one voice calling God's people to be better. The hope that they prophesy is based on the love of God and the repentance of the people.

So I hope our leaders in government will not return to politics as usual. I hope that they will see the need for fundamental changes. If they don't, the structures of racism will continue to cause unrest, the safety net for the poor will continue to be inadequate, the climate will continue to cause more and greater catastrophes. And I hope that we, the people, don't continue with our disenchantment with politics, but feel a renewed energy for expressing our hopes and dreams to our leaders.

As for the baptized community, I hope that we can express the welcome of the church where all people are regarded as God's children and loved by God. AND I hope that we can repent of our past failings and live out the gospel by the power of the Spirit. The church's complicity in racism is well documented even if not well known within the church. I learned last week that during the second rise of the KKK beginning around 1915, forty thousand Protestant clergy were members (from North and South). We'll have to come to grips with this and other indicators that the white church hasn't fully learned to love our black and brown sisters and brothers.

So baptized community of faith, let's remove the blinders. Let's welcome and love all God's children. Let's see the love that God has for every human being. Let's take courage from God's Spirit to acknowledge our failings, to repent of them, and to walk by faith, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Or to put it another way, let's listen to Jesus. Amen.

Resource:

*The Color of Compromise* by Jemar Tisby. Zondervan Reflective: Grand Rapids MI, 2019