

“Baptized To Serve”
Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

A few months ago I invited you to submit scripture texts or topics upon which you'd like to hear me preach a sermon. The next two Sundays will be in response to your suggestions. Today is not a sermon you requested. If I were on the other side of the pulpit, however, and was invited to do so, I would request this sermon. It's what I need to hear at the beginning of a new year.

The Sunday after Epiphany (which is always celebrated on January 6) is the day when the church, at least the Western church, reads the story of Jesus' baptism. In preaching, I don't always follow precisely the Christian calendar and the suggested readings in the lectionary, but during the past 25 years, there have only been a couple of times when I have not dealt with this story on this particular Sunday. Most of those years I have also included an opportunity for us to remember and to renew our baptismal vows.

For me, this service has become as important, if not more important, than Christmas. I'm in good company. The Christmas story is told in only two of the four Gospels. The story of Jesus' baptism is told in all four. It's as if the Bible is saying that our faith story can get along without a birth story, but we can't get along without hearing about the Baptism of Jesus – it's that important.

The Easter story is also told in all four Gospels. We know Easter is *that* important for the language of the resurrection permeates the entire New Testament. Baptism is also a lot like Easter because it's theme is about death and resurrection. **“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”ⁱ**

The Baptism of Jesus is really a big deal in the Greek Orthodox Church. It is always celebrated on the Day of Epiphany and in some communities it is done in such a fun and exciting way that no one could ever forget one's baptism. I've told you before how the Baptism of Jesus is celebrated in the Greek community of Tarpon Springs, Florida. After an Epiphany Day service in St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Cathedral, there is a colorful parade to Spring Bayou. After blessing the young men who must be between the ages of 16 and 18 to dive, the priest tosses a cross into the water. The teenagers run to jump into the water and the first one who retrieves it is given a special blessing.

One young man said, “This day is what I've been thinking about all year long.” Can you imagine people, even young people, being so excited about Epiphany!?! If it all seems raucous and frivolous to you, please understand that it is an intentional way of connecting young people to this ancient church. In fact, all the boys who dive have to fill out an application, write an essay about the significance of the event and attend an Epiphany workshop at the church, all in an attempt to assure that the meaning of Jesus' baptism is not lost on the next generation.ⁱⁱ

What about our own baptism? We don't have to jump into a bayou or a baptistry in order to remember Jesus' and our own baptism. The church has argued for centuries about the proper

age – as an infant or as a believing adult – and the proper mode – sprinkling, pouring, immersion. We have this penchant for straining out gnats and swallowing camelsⁱⁱⁱ and arguing about minutia to avoid the greater task at hand. What is more important is the meaning of our baptism into Christ and never forgetting it. Since I was not quite 4-months old, I have no memory of my baptism, but I do have my baptismal certificate and I do have this annual service to help me remember that I am baptized and to renew my vows.

What does our baptism mean? It means that we are God's beloved, ones with whom God is well pleased. Wait a minute? Isn't such an affirmation reserved for Jesus alone? Yes and no. Yes, because no one else is worthy of such an affirmation and Jesus was. No, because Jesus was baptized – not because he needed to be but because he wanted to stand in the river beside us. If Jesus wants to share human life with us in every respect, is it too hard to imagine that he wants us to share his life in every respect as well, including the blessing, **“You are my ... beloved; with you I am well pleased”?**

If I am not baptized, does that mean I am not beloved by God? Of course not. Everyone is created in God's image whether they are baptized or not. Baptism is the public sign that we are loved by God and called out to serve God's purposes. One of those purposes is to recognize every other person and one made in the image of God.

Richard Mouw is the president of Fuller Theological Seminary in California. He recently wrote about his days as a seminary student and how he worked the night shift in a factory, using his break time as well as possible to study. However his precious little time was constantly interrupted by Jed, the night watchman, who liked to talk. Mouw tried to ignore him until in one of those unwelcome conversations he learned that Jed had met Ernest Hemingway several times. Because Mouw was a huge fan of Hemingway, Jed suddenly became to him a more significant human being. He looked at the watchman in a new light.

In later reflection, Mouw saw himself in a new light and how he failed to see Jed as someone who was important, whether or not he knew Hemingway, because first and foremost he was a child of God, made in God's image. He writes,

The Christian life is a special way of seeing ... and other human beings are high on the list of what we must work at seeing in a Christian way ... the way that I had been responding to [the watchman], there can be no denying that I had not been attributing to him the value that God had placed on him. To be sure, we can't always be thinking noble theological thoughts about every person we come across each day. It is unrealistic to expect that when we're going through the checkout line at the local supermarket we will always remember to see the image of God in the person who asks whether we want paper or plastic. But we can try...^{iv}

We had better try. To so see others as valued by God is our calling. Who is in a better position to know that everyone is valued and loved by God than those who know that they are themselves valued and loved by God? Baptism doesn't confer that love upon us, but the waters of baptism cleanse our eyes of all the gook that prevents us from seeing others as God sees.

Not only is the person at the checkout line as valued and loved by God, so can she/he be a servant of God on the front lines of ministry – that is the other meaning of our baptism in Christ. We are baptized to serve!

I shared a copy of the Richard Mouw article with the church staff because when I read it I almost fell off my chair in laughter. People have often asked me if in retirement I was going to work in another church somehow. My answer has been, “Heck no! If I still felt called to work in the church, I’d stay here. No, I’m going to bag groceries in Publix (the iconic grocery store in Florida).” More recently, when matters get complicated around the church and others look to me for the wisdom I sadly lack, I’ll pause and smile – “Paper or plastic, have a nice day!”

Then this past Friday evening I was watching the ABC news program, *20/20*. It was all about finding happiness. Someone has concluded that Denmark is the happiest nation on the planet (the United States comes in a #23, in spite of all our wealth and power). In spite of the cold, dreary climate and high taxes, people in Denmark “feel tucked in and cared for.” There is respect for all occupations, even the garbage man. One said he absolutely loved his job because it gave him an opportunity to get to know people along his route and to spread a little cheer to them, and they to him. Martin Luther supposedly said that one could milk cows to the glory of God. I sure hope so, because someone has to milk the cows!

When I was a young child, people would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up. A garbage man, I would reply. Of course I had no concept of being a servant of God, I just knew I wouldn’t have to go to college and that seemed good to me at the time.

All kidding aside, I’ve always had a sense that no matter who you did for a living, you could be a servant of God in and through your occupation, assuming it was legal, that it served the common good, and that you did your best to affirm the humanity of other employees and customers. Even though I felt and answered the call to be a minister of Word and Sacrament, I’ve never felt that you had to be ordained to be a faithful follower of Jesus, or that those in church occupations were in “full-time Christian ministry” while others weren’t and, therefore, were not as important. (Really, is there such a thing as a part-time Christian? Isn’t everyone as important in the Body of Christ as everyone else? Check out First Corinthians 12!) I wish the church was more creative so that its response to someone who has a deepening experience of faith wasn’t only to usher them to seminary so they could become a pastor. Do we not need people who love God deeply with heart, soul, mind and strength serving in government, education, medicine, social services, garbage collection, grocery clerks, etc.?

There’s a hymn text I liked to sing in my early days of ministry says it well:^v

The light of God is falling
Upon life’s common way;
The Master’s voice still calling,
“Come, walk with Me today.”

No duty can seem lowly
To those who live with Thee,
And all of life grows holy,
O Christ of Galilee.

Who share their lives’ pure pleasures,
And walk the honest road,
Who trade with heaping measures,
And lift another’s load,
Who turn the wrong down bluntly,
And lend the right a hand,
They dwell in God’s own country,
They till the Holy Land.

I never like to say *never*, but when I retire, my current vision is not to work in the church, but to live as the church in the world. There’s no retirement from discipleship. Many of you have taught me that. I’ve also preached that sermon before. Now it’s time for me to walk the talk. To put it crassly – after 41 years of working in the church, I want to find out what it’s like to be a

disciple of Jesus Christ when I'm not paid to be one.

People often ask, "What is the most important issue facing the church today? My answer is that the church become more about mission and less about institutional survival. How can we do that? By going back to basics and the very beginning of Jesus' ministry and our own – by remembering our baptism – that we are God's beloved and that we are baptized to serve. By God's grace, may we never forget.

Endnotes

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- i. Romans 6:3-4
 - ii. *Last Year Wasn't Dean's First Tarpon Epiphany*, Klint Lowry, TBO.com; January 9, 2008
 - iii. See Matthew 23:24
 - iv. *A Second Glance*, Richard J. Mouw, Christian Century, December 25, 2007, p. 27
 - v. Louis F. Benson, 1910 (#482 in The Hymnbook, 1955)