

SERMON FOR JANUARY 10, 2016

“NO PRESSURE, JOHN”

By Gene Detert

On a sunny morning, William’s mother came into her son’s room and said, “William it’s Sunday. Time to get up! Time to get up and go to church! Now, get up!”

From under the covers came mumbles, “I don’t want to go!”

“What do you mean?” she said. “That’s silly! Now get up and get dressed and go to church!”

“NO!” he shot back. “I’ll give you two reasons. I don’t like them and they don’t like me!”

“Nonsense,” she told him. “I’ll give YOU two reasons to go. First, you are 42 years old, and second, YOU are the PASTOR!”

In today’s Gospel reading we again relive the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River as foretold by Saint Luke. All of the Gospel writers report this event in the life of Jesus, but none of the others have the flair for the dramatic, quite like Luke’s presentation. In verses 15 and 16, John the Baptist attempts to dispel rumors that he might actually be the Messiah. John scolds his followers saying, “I baptize you with water; but ONE who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.” That proclamation must have been quite surprising to the throngs of John’s followers, since he was something of a celebrity in that age. In fact, it is said that he had his own disciples, sort of first century groupies, who hung on his every word. So, of all the high priests and prophets of the day, no one would have been better qualified than John to baptize the real Messiah, the living God! Despite his scolding to his followers, according to Luke’s gospel, it is reasonable to question whether John even recognized Jesus as “THE ONE,” or that he was about to baptize the son of God? In verse 21 we read... “Now when all of the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying”, only then does something amazing occur, “the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove.”

According to Luke, Jesus Christ may have stood in the back of the line, behind all of the other people, waiting to be immersed in the muddy waters of the Jordan, and John the Baptist never recognized who he was or the monumental significance of the moment! One author describes that moment as “an epiphany for the prophet himself, even as he keeps preaching his message of repentance and warning, and baptizes all the people, one after another, as they come forward.”⁽¹⁾ Perhaps John forgot to put in his contact lens that morning. Or maybe, considering Luke’s gospel, John may have been so consumed with his work that he completely missed “the ONE who was to come,” even when the ONE was right before his eyes!⁽²⁾ From verse 17, it would seem that John was expecting maybe more of an “ax-wielding arsonist, rather than a gentle carpenter, whom the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove chose to roost upon that morning.”⁽³⁾ Once the voice of God came from heaven pronouncing “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” surely John must have been aware of the important baptism he had just

performed! Whether he recognized it or not, John had just initiated, in the presence of his followers, “the ONE who was to come,” the ONE who’s life and works would change this world, forever. Maybe it was a blessing for John that there was “no pressure” to perform the most perfect baptism, ever.

One question that I keep wrestling with is this: why would Jesus, the Son of God, living among humans, even need to be baptized, by John or anyone? Daniel L. Migliore in his book, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, answers that question this way: “Jesus commences his vocation, his obedient response to the call of God, by being baptized by John. In this act, Jesus enters into solidarity with lost humanity. He begins the life of costly love and service that eventually leads to his passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus’ baptism thus signifies his solidarity with the sinners and outcasts of this world and his complete obedience to his Father’s will.”⁽⁴⁾ So, it was necessary for Jesus to unite with humans as he began his work in response to God’s will. In his baptism, Jesus “took the plunge right along with the rest of us, and never asks us to go anywhere he has not been first.”⁽⁵⁾

Baptism today is still such a significant event that we recognize baptism as a sacrament of our faith. What is a sacrament? According to Martin Copenhaver in his book, *To Begin at the Beginning*, “a sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace.” A sacrament is a communal act of the church through which God’s love is made visible. Such uncommon love is made visible through the common stuff of life. In baptism, the love of God is made visible in something as common and precious as water.⁽⁶⁾ Through water at baptism, God embraces you- no matter who you are- and brings you into Christ’s church.⁽⁷⁾

I really appreciate the way that we baptize infants here at Emanuel Church. Pastor Bill is so mindful of the responsibility of the congregation to the parents, god-parents and to the child being baptized that he introduces the new member of God’s church family to all who are present. He reminds us that we need to love and support this child as a “beloved of God” throughout all of the days of our lives together. Through the ritual of placing Holy water on the forehead of the infant and pronouncing the words that Jesus taught us to state, we carry on a tradition that links us to centuries of Christians. Jesus said, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Matthew 28; 19-20. We also present the parents with simple, but meaningful gifts; a baptismal record, a candle, a baptismal doll for the girls or “action figure” for the boys, all with the intention of highlighting the importance of that day in the life of the new member of Emanuel’s church family. Our infant baptisms do not cause the sky to open up and the voice of God to be heard, but surely, the Spirit of God is in our midst with each baptism.

Like most of you, I cannot remember my baptism. I trust that my parents did ask the pastor of the tiny German speaking E&R church in the Town of Byron, a predecessor to the United Church of Christ, to baptize me. I know I had god-parents who sent me a present on my birthdays and attended my confirmation. Somewhere, in a box of old, yellowed-from -age papers I retrieved from my father’s home after his death, I may even have my baptismal certificate. But whether I have documentation of my baptism or not is really not relevant. I know that the development of my faith has been influenced by pastors, countless members and Elders of

Emanuel church, instructors at the Lay Academy, friends and mentors I have come to know and respect from my involvement in the wider church, CHHSM, the Administrative Team of the Southeast Association, and, most recently, the Search Committee for the Wisconsin Conference. Martin Luther, the great Reformation leader, passionately reminded people to “Remember your Baptism!” By that he did not mean that we should have specific memories of a historical day. Instead, Luther wrote “a truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism once begun and ever to be continued.”⁽⁸⁾ Perhaps Luther wanted us to remember, each and every day of our life, who we are, whose we are, and how beloved we are.⁽⁹⁾ Just as we promise to support and love the infant being baptized during a given Sunday worship service, so too must we carry out that promise to support and love one another all of the days of our lives.

Although all baptisms at Emanuel are meaningful and inspirational, one baptism had a profound influence on my understanding of the Spirit’s presence during that sacrament. Several years ago, when I was the congregational President, Pastor Bob Snyder called and asked if I would do a favor for him. Pastor Bob had received an urgent call from the family of an elderly church member who was at home, but in hospice care. As this gentleman was preparing for the transition to his next life with God, he was overwhelmed with guilt over the fact that he had never been baptized. His desire was to have a private baptism in his home before he died. Pastor Bob asked if I could possibly leave the work of my office that afternoon and go along with him to serve as a representative of the congregation. I gladly agreed to accompany our Pastor for this important duty, although I couldn’t get myself to disclose to Pastor Bob my discomfort over dealing with the reality and inevitability of death. As we entered the room and met with the man and his wife, a sense of calm seemed to fill the room. Pastor Bob performed the baptism with amazing sensitivity and care. As Pastor Bob touched the man’s forehead with the baptismal water, his face shined as though he had just experienced “new life.” I was instantly aware that a Spirit was present in that room; that God or Jesus or all of the saints in heaven were united with us at that very moment! It is a feeling that I will never forget! To this day, I truly believe that God was at work in that room, reassuring the dying man, gently whispering in words that only his ears could hear; “you are my beloved, with you and your life, I am well pleased!”

The last word for today’s message is borrowed from theology author, Martin Copenhaver, who I think eloquently summarizes the meaning of baptism when he writes: “It is in baptism that God makes a claim on us by binding us to Jesus. The rest of our days are an opportunity to live out the implications of our baptism, to learn who we are already through baptism, people who are marked indelibly by the sign of the cross. That is, by baptism we are made into Christians and then spend the rest of our lives learning to be Christians, to live the Christian way of life. The promise offered by God may be fulfilled in our lives or not, but the PROMISE REMAINS!⁽¹⁰⁾ AMEN

Resources

1. Kathryn M. Matthews; Sermon Seed for January 10, 2016, UCC.org@ p.2.
2. Matthews, id. @ p.3.
3. Barbara Brown Taylor, “Sacramental Mud”; Mixed Blessings, as quoted by Matthews@ p.3.
4. Daniel L. Migliore, Faith Seeking Understanding, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991 @ p.214.

5. Barbara Brown Taylor as quoted by Matthews @ p.7.
6. Martin B. Copenhaver, To Begin at the Beginning, An Introduction to the Christian Faith, United Church Press, 1994 @ p.146.
7. Sidney D. Fowler, What matters to you? Matters to us; United Church Press, 2008 @ p.32.
8. Matthews, id. @ p.4.
9. Matthews, id. @ p.4.
10. Copenhaver, id. @ p.149.