

January 8, 2017
Luke 3: 1-22
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“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight O God, our strength and our redeemer.”

As is the tradition of this time in the Christian year, we have moved from the birth to the baptism --- a span of years is skipped over – from infant to 30-year-old man, joining the crowd of other seekers to be baptized by John in the river Jordan.

Though the lectionary follows the Gospel of Matthew this year, I chose instead the Gospel of Luke because I have always found it more earthy and meaningful. We get a greater sense of Jesus’ cousin, John, son to the temple priest Zechariah; and his mission away from traditional temple worship in the muddy waters of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance.

This particular version of Jesus’ baptism tells us more about what ultimately shaped Jesus’ ministry in the few years ahead.

While John tries to claim that he is not worthy to baptize Jesus, Jesus is not interested in who has more power, he is simply showing that he is part of humanity’s search for a deeper purpose to living. What John is doing and proclaiming, clearly moves him, and it will in turn mark the true beginning of Jesus servanthood.

Over time, baptism became a very significant ritual for early Christian communities. It was the ritual that marked a new beginning and a commitment on the part of the newly baptized, to turn their lives toward a new direction.

In a book by Dorothy C. Bass entitled “Practicing Our Faith”, is this thoughtful background on how early Christian communities understood the symbol of baptism:

“When Christianity was first emerging in societies under Roman rule, Christians could scarcely ignore that baptism meant dying to their former ways in order to “walk in newness of life.” Becoming part of a community that practiced hospitality and forgiveness, a community where there was no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3: 28), entailed a radical step away from the violent culture of Rome, a step that might even bring physical death in times of persecution.” (It was not the nice, water sprinkling on the head baptism that many of us think of!)... Those who wished to join the church often spent months or years as

“catechumens” who received mentoring and instruction in preparation for baptism. When some were deemed ready, the church gathered in the darkness of Easter Eve, celebrating the night when Jesus passed over from death to life just as the catechumens were about to do. The new Christians confessed their faith and were led into the water...In the weeks following their baptism they studied more about what shape their new direction in life might take and then were sent into the world with this new identity. They would return weekly to the community to pray, sing, read scripture and share bread and wine. Their immediate and ongoing challenges would be to live in the world, each day, the life-giving way of life into which they had been received.” (Pg. 199)

Tom and Scott read the contemporary version of Luke’s gospel by Eugene Peterson. This version makes the intent of baptism very clear.

“What are we to do now?” the crowd asks.

John’s response is pretty basic.

“If you have two coats, give one away, do the same with your food.”

The tax men also said, “Teacher, what should we do?”

John told them: “No more extortion – collect only what is required by law.”

And the soldiers asked him: “And what should we do?”

He told them, “No shakedowns, no blackmail...”

The anxious people came looking for hope and for someone to save them from their difficult lives. In John’s mind, no one was a victim or unimportant or powerless. The ritual of baptism was about repenting from any sense of victimhood or powerlessness --- turning away from revenge or apathy. The Greek word for “repent” is “metanoia”, which means “to turn”.

Baptism is not simply a gift which we passively receive – it is an active intention on our part, marking a turning away from selfish living and turning towards generosity, nonviolence and blessing.

This past Thursday I was reading an obituary in the Seattle Times about Al Sigiya, a Seattle Asian-American activist. He gave his life to empowering the Asian-American community of Seattle to speak up about discrimination and other issues that impacted them.

One of the photos was from 1971 showing Sigiya at a demonstration he organized at Seattle Central Community College calling for Asians to be hired for higher-level positions and for

Asian-American studies classes. In the photo he is talking into a megaphone while carrying a sign that reads: "Quiet Asians? Hell no!"

I couldn't help but think of Sigiyama as an Asian-American John the Baptist, challenging his community of "quiet" Asians to "repent" – to turn in a new direction, and claim their right to be whole.

According to the reading from Luke, even Jesus went down into the muddy water as a carpenter and came back up a Servant to the Ways of God. The same man but with a new direction.

Is there still power in the ritual of baptism for us 21st century progressive Christians? Baptism joined those early Christians to a community where hospitality, forgiveness and nonviolence was the foundation of life together. Their lifestyle stood in stark contrast to the violence and oppression of Roman rule.

Reading this, I found myself pondering whether my own values and actions as a baptized Christian stand in contrast to the society in which I live, not just in this place but when I am out and about in a complicated and broader world. Have I watered down my commitments in order to fit in...Have I gotten too comfortable and complacent...Do I need a John the Baptist to light a fire in my belly again?

I think these are worthy questions to ponder alone and in community as we move forward into this New Year.

If baptism is an ongoing commitment to turn away from selfish living towards generosity, nonviolence and blessing – then what will that look like for us as a church community?

How might we be bold in living out our baptismal call this coming year in our relationships with one another and the broader community; in our programs, worship, and outreach?

There is no one answer to this question – but one answer I would like to offer is to consider participating in an invitation coming from our national UCC office. Our denominational leaders

have asked us to engage in what they are calling “sacred conversations on race” with a focus in 2017 on the impact of white privilege.

Our Executive Minister, John Dorhauer writes: *“America is growing more racially divided. Our hope is that we will open our eyes to the privilege we carry without even realizing it, and awaken to how it impacts inequality across our country every day.”*

Being willing to engage in what could be difficult conversations about race, carefully and with an attitude of curiosity and mutual respect --- is one way to fulfill our baptismal commitment. To help us in this process I have chosen a book for us to read together by Debby Irving called “Waking Up White”. I hope some of you will join Scott and I in this important conversation. I am certain that I, for one, have a lot to learn about this very real and sacred issue.

As it was for the people who came to John – including Jesus himself – baptism was a symbol of God’s blessing and also a commitment to turn away from that which harms, towards that which leads to wholeness and life for all. Remembering our baptism is a time for us to prayerfully and boldly take stock of whether our lives and our church reflect the generosity and justice of our baptismal call.

Let us pray...