



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"A Sanctuary in the City... Living Faith"

June 10, 2018

The Third Sunday of Pentecost

A Sermon based on Matthew 3.13-17

"Baptism Is for Grownups"

The Reverend Lawrence W. Farris

Her name was Joan. She was a hospice patient of my wife's, and I was her chaplain. She was bed bound, dying of lung cancer, and full of amazing stories about her life as a Las Vegas showgirl, some of which would not be entirely appropriate for a sermon. Joan had read the Bible in its entirety, and her theological questions and insights were remarkably astute. I enjoyed her immensely. One day she asked me to baptize her. I answered I would count it a privilege to do so. And, she said, it must be by full immersion because that's how it was done for Jesus. I had never done a baptism by immersion; moreover, I said, I wasn't at all sure how we could manage it given Joan's extremely frail condition. "I've got a hottub!", she said. And so, some days later, with all her family gathered around, I lifted her 70 pound body from a wheelchair, and carried her down into the waters of her hot tub – jets off. My tears and those everyone present joined the waters. And she came up out the water beaming as if she had just seen into the very heart of heaven. And four days later, she died.

Her name was Linda, and she was my friend. She was smart, wickedly funny, and did not suffer fools gladly. She had married later than many of her peers, had two children, and had been a mostly work from home mom. And then her husband took his own life, and much of the life she had known died with him. Linda had begun to attend, but had not joined, a small Mennonite congregation. That congregation surrounded her, and her children, with remarkable support, acceptance and patient love. And she came at last to desire baptism. As was the custom of that

congregation, Linda's baptism took place outside, in a river with most of the congregation present. It was on a bright and sunny, but not very warm, Sunday in May when Linda went beneath the chilly waters. And she came forth with her own tears adding to the waters of the stream.

And thus did her journey in faith and toward healing begin, grounded in her certainty that she was indeed God's beloved.

His name was Frank, anglicized from Francisco. An immigrant, he had worked hard to make a life here, and had not always found the way easy as there have always been folks who are sure they are the real Americans, as if we were not all immigrants – save Native Americans - somewhere back on the family tree. Frank was very old and very sick when I saw him for the last time in the hospital. He looked up when I entered his room and said, "Larry, I'm going to die soon, very soon. I want to be baptized now. You know I love Jesus; I hope that's enough." And violating several rules of our Presbyterian Book of Order, I took some water from the Styrofoam cup at his bedside, and baptized him.

Can you tell I've got baptism on the brain today? Actually, I've been thinking about it a lot lately, in these confused and confusing times. I think I'm searching about for something, for my anchors, my handholds, for a solid place to stand where my footing will be made sure once again, as our psalm puts it. And I think that something is baptism.

As I read the gospels, I am not infrequently struck by how precious little I have in common with Jesus. It's not just that I am chronically unable to walk on water or still storms; it's that when I behold the grace and truth, the wisdom and compassion, the hospitality and single-mindedness, the devotion and commitment I see in Jesus, I can only look at my own feeble attempts in all those areas with a large measure of despair. I know I have a friend in Jesus, as the old hymn puts it, but I have no

illusions of that friendship having anything like the equality of friendship I enjoy with my guys with whom I have a beer with once a month wherein we solve all the world's problems. Jesus is master; I am frail disciple. Jesus is light; I am often fumbling about in darkness of my own creating. Jesus sacrifices; I am far too often far too focused on my own wellbeing.

So it is an occasion of considerable joy when I do come across something I, and you, have in common with Jesus. And that is that we were both baptized once upon a time. I was four years old, standing in front of the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of Ann Arbor in October of 1953 when the Rev. Dr. Henry Kuizenga wetted my very blond locks; Jesus was about thirty, standing in the Jordan River about two millennia ago when his somewhat reluctant cousin John did the deed. And that commonality gives me not only joy, not only hope, but identity.

Most often in our congregation, we baptize infants. We do so because we believe that even before a baby can think theologically or act graciously or serve well, the grace of God in Christ is reaching out to shape that child for its life journey with God. And I love that we so believe and behave. There are few moments in ministry I enjoy more than baptizing an infant. It's what I most miss as a retired minister. But a potential danger in our practice is that we will think baptism is something mostly for babies, little more than a sort of religious naming ceremony, and thereby miss its crucial importance as the beginning point of our whole and lifelong journey in faith. Baptism, I would contend, is the beginning of our eternal life, and our lives this side of death are best understood as an unfolding of our baptism.

When, in our gospel lesson, Jesus comes to John to be baptized, John protests that it should be the other way around, that he should be baptized by Jesus, given their relative importance. In my imagination, I think this is a moment tinged with a bit of humor. Out there in the river, with a whole lot of folks looking on, I imagine they have a whispered argument that might have gone something like:

Jesus: Okay, John, let's do this.

John: Are you kidding me, Jesus? This is like totally backwards, man!

Jesus: Trust me. This is the way it's supposed to go down. You baptize me.

John: Oh, yeah? And just what sins are you going to confess Mr. I've-never-

done-anything-wrong cousin of mine?

Jesus: Come on, man. You've done this hundreds of time. Just do it.

John: I don't know. This just feels weird. What if something crazy happens like

the heavens opening? How're we going to explain that?

Jesus: John. Focus. Just do it. Now.

Some commentators suggest that John is seemingly tempting Jesus to disobey God's intentions. I don't think so. I think John is just very clear on who he is and who Jesus is. Jesus sets matters straight, making clear it is crucial to do as God requires, and he is baptized. Fr. Andrew Marr, the Abbot of St. Gregory's Abbey in Three Rivers, Michigan insightfully writes of this moment:

John is still thinking in terms of superior and inferior positions. By submitting to John's baptism, Jesus has abolished the positions altogether. There is no pedestal to gain and no pedestal to lose. Not only did Jesus receive the same baptism that was administered to "Jerusalem and all Judea," but he received the baptism that is administered to all his followers who ask for it. Far from receiving a royal anointing that, by definition, could not be shared, Jesus received an anointing that, by definition, *must* be shared, that *must* be available to all. This means that Jesus' anointing is still available to tax collectors and prostitutes and the "brood of vipers" who engineered his death. That is to say, this anointing is even available to you and me.

So, although many of us were baptized as infants or children and that continues to be our custom, Jesus' adult baptism and ours are like unto one another. It is something we share, thanks be to God. John's baptism had been announced as an act of repentance wherein sins were symbolically washed away. Jesus, we affirm, was without sin, and didn't need that kind of baptism. Rather, something unique happens when he is baptized. The heavens do indeed open above Jesus; he sees the Holy Spirit descends like a dove; and voice says, "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." His identity is named and confirmed, as is ours. Now I don't know about you, but I don't recall the heavens opening at my baptism. And I confess I have trouble even envisioning just what that might look like. And while I do remember water running down my face and onto my worn-for-the-first-time suit, I don't recall a dove or a voice out of the heavens.

Nevertheless, since we are baptized with Jesus' baptism, we, like him, have our identity confirmed in that moment. We, too, are named as God's beloved and are commissioned for a life of service to God. Notice in the story that Jesus has done nothing by way of ministry yet – no teaching, healing, preaching, calling disciples; no water walking, no storm stilling. This bestowal of God's blessing on him, and on us, has to do only with God's pleasure in what God has created, in Jesus and in us, not with any of our deeds, done or undone. And that is good, good news. Baptism doesn't mean we're perfect, doesn't mean we matter more than anyone else, doesn't mean we're awesome – it means we are beloved because God is love.

Naming matters. I was taught as a child to reply to kids who called me names like 'stupid' or 'spaz' or 'loser,' not by punching their lights out as was my wont, but by saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." And I sometimes actually heeded that advice, but not always. I made more than my share of trips to the principal's office for fighting. Miss Henne and I became a whole lot better acquainted than either of us might have preferred. Because even at that age, I had begun to realize that little comeback aphorism about sticks and stones does not happen to be true. What we are called, what we are named, does matter. If we are called dumb or ugly or loser long enough, we begin to believe there are grounds for such appellations. It's called bullying. Tell a child she's stupid and lazy and makes bad decisions, and there's good likelihood she'll live into those expectations. Tell her she's bright, beautiful and beloved, and very different paths will open up.

And in our baptism, thanks be to God, we have been named "Beloved." Who among us does not have days when we deeply, desperately, need to remember that is our most foundational identity, the place we stand. We are beloved of God. And that just happens to be what we share with Jesus in our baptism. When the great Christian reformer of

the 16th century, Martin Luther, found himself assailed by trouble and temptations, doubts and fears, it is said he would repeat again and again, “I am baptized. I am baptized. I am baptized.” Luther wrote a great deal of church music in his time. If he were with us today, he might say something like:

My confusion is tamed,
When I remember my name,
And for you it's the same:
Christian. Christ-ian.
Baptized and Beloved,
Disciple of Jesus the Christ.

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his ministry, of all his labor and sacrifice for the peace and justice that is kingdom of God. There are many, many steps ahead of him – some joyful, some painful, but all part of his work for God's kingdom. And so it is for each of us. Our baptism not only names us; it begins our life of service. And as we grow and develop in our understanding of God and of the gifts God has bestowed on each of us, concrete expressions of our work for the kingdom come clear to us.

So, repeat after me. I am baptized. I am beloved. And I have work to do for the kingdom of God.

You'll notice the baptismal font is open this morning. Not only are we celebrating the sacrament today – and for a grownup - but we will all have the opportunity to remember the power and importance of our own baptism. And so, I will close by inviting you, after the benediction, to come forward and touch these waters, maybe touch them to your head or your heart. And as you do so, say it again: I am baptized. I am beloved. And I have work to do for the kingdom of God.

Amen +