

WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/NOVEMBER 15, 2009

REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM/MARK 1:1-11

REV. DR. LYNN CHEYNEY

I. THE TEXT

This morning we renew our commitment to Christ as we bring our 2010 financial pledges to God. I thought it an appropriate morning for renewing our baptismal vows – for those of us who grew up in church, the vows that many of our parents made as they held us in their arms as infants. The vows we then took in our confirmation, and again when we became members here at WPC. Martin Luther said, “Indeed if I had the matter under my control, I would not want God to speak to me from heaven or to appear to me; but this I would want – and my daily prayers are directed to this end – that I might have the proper respect and true appreciation for the gift of Baptism.”¹ On this day as we remember and renew our baptism, let’s begin by considering another baptism – the baptism of our Lord by John the Baptizer in the river Jordan. While the story is told in all four gospel accounts, this morning we will hear Mark’s version. Hear the word of God...the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” ⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

II. PRAYER: Loving, caring, hoping God, we turn our faces and our hearts again your direction to receive from you a word of grace, a word of direction, a word of hope. Amen.

III. WHO ARE YOU?

Who are you? I think of some of the things that describe who I am...

Beverly Lynn Cheyney

married to my beloved... Gary Sattler

Pastor of Westwood Community Church

Ordained, Doctor of Ministry

blue eyes, blonde hair [with a little help from Lisa and her magic potion, that is]

closing in on 55 years old

preacher’s daughter

lover of chocolate and Starbucks triple decaf Lattes, fairly hostile toward lima beans and brussell sprouts

The list, of course, could go on and on. Some items telling you more than others about who I am. But, who am I, really? Who are **you**, really? Apart from the usual things you say about yourself at a dinner party or a church gathering there lurks the fundamental human question – what makes you – you?

IV. JESUS' BAPTISM

That question was, no doubt, what brought those who had gone out to the Jordan river that day to hear John... John the Baptizer... odd dresser... peculiar culinary tastes... powerful preacher. From all over Judea people flocked to the desert to hear what he had to say. He spoke to them about their lives and the messes they'd made – about forgiveness and the kind of life in store for them if only they would turn themselves toward God. And then they'd walk into the river where John baptized them into a new, forgiven, redirected life.

On this particular day however, something extraordinary happened. I imagine it this way – right there at the river, right in the middle of the 3rd point of John's sermon, Jesus steps from the crowd and walks up to John – the two of them hold a private conversation leaving everyone else to wonder what's up.

I imagine the question flying through the crowd – “who is that man?” With the bits and pieces of information, they assembled this bit of an identity profile...

He is Jesus... of Nazareth... a Jew... Son of Mary and Joseph... a carpenter... a far better dresser than John.

The list of what they know so far about Jesus is a relatively short one. But, who is he, **really**? They are about to find out.

While the crowd looks on, John and Jesus make their way into the river – the beginnings of the baptism ritual. John takes hold of Jesus arm, places his hand on Jesus' back and lowers him down under the water. So far an ordinary baptism... but things don't quite go as normal. As John raises Jesus out of the water the heavens seem to explode with light – something looking rather like a dove flutters down on Jesus' shoulder – and then there was a voice – the voice of heaven. “You are my son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” With those words we learn precisely who Jesus **really** is...

Son of God... beloved... one with whom God is quite pleased. This whole phrase is important – it is not only a theological assertion of Jesus' identity, but a statement about how God sees us... with pleasure.

V. BAPTISM

Those words spoken to Jesus in his baptism have everything to do with what happened to us in ours. Every time I take a little one in my arms, or a teen or adult kneels by the baptismal font, and the water trickles down their forehead – every time I utter the ancient words, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” are we not naming the **real** identity of that precious little one, of that kneeling person? Who are they, really? Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, notes that baptism is ‘a ritual setting aside of ordinary identity’.ⁱⁱ In baptism we learn precisely who that person is – Child of God... beloved... one with whom God is quite pleased. The world-changing baptism of a Palestinian Jew is the prototype for all baptisms since.

Imagine your own baptism for moment, whether you were old enough to remember it or not, whether sprinkled or dunked – there was a day that water trickled down your forehead or dripped from your clothing. Our faith claims that that simple liturgical drama was of cosmic significance. There your true identity, the answer to the question, “who are you, really” – was declared once and forever – you belong to God... you are deeply loved... God is delighted with you. Among all the other possible descriptors the world may have for us – divorced, married, successful, struggling, mechanic, teacher, grandpa, entrepreneur, student, gardener, golfer,

vegetarian – it is the identity given to us in baptism that lies closest to the heart of who we really are – child of God – beloved – one with whom God is quite pleased.

More than the secular rituals that changed our social status – getting a driver’s license, becoming old enough to vote, then to drink – our baptism changed everything... it changed our very identity. Take that in for minute. Of all the possible answers to the “who are you” question, there is one that, taken in and taken seriously, has more power to give shape and meaning to your life than any other. Who are you, **really**? You are God’s child... the God of the universe loves, delights in you. You are God’s son or daughter – you might be a bratty one, or an estranged one; you may be a staying-close-to-home-with-God one, you may be a seeking one or a relaxed one, no matter what flavor, you are God’s child; God’s beloved, cherished child. Just imagine that.

In his classic 1948 sermon *You Are Accepted*, Paul Tillich put it this way:

“Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. [Grace] strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life... [Grace] strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. [Grace] strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.

“Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, ‘You are accepted.’ If such an experience happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we (may or) may not be better than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing more is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

VI. CHILD OF GOD

Renowned preacher/theologian Fred Craddock, professor emeritus at Candler School of Theology in Georgia tells a story that took place years ago at a little restaurant in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. He and his wife had been looking forward to a quiet dinner, just the two of them. As they waited for their meal, they noticed a distinguished looking, white-haired gentleman moving from table to table speaking to the guests. Craddock whispered to his wife, “I sure hope he doesn’t come over here.”

But Craddock’s wish was not granted... the elderly gentleman stopped at their table. “Are you here on vacation?” the man asked?

Fred says, “I said, ‘Yes,’” but I really meant, “*It’s none of your business.*”

“Where are you from?”

“We’re from Oklahoma.”

“Splendid state, I hear, though I’ve never been there. What do you do in Oklahoma?”

In his head, Fred was saying, “*Leave us alone. We’re on vacation, we don’t know who you are, and frankly, we don’t really care.*” But what came out of his mouth was, “I teach homiletics at the graduate seminary of Phillips University.”

“Oh, so you teach preachers to preach, do you? Well, I’ve got a story I want to tell you.” With that the old man pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with Craddock and his wife. “*Oh, no, another preacher story,*” Craddock groaned inwardly, “*everyone seems to have one.*”

The man stuck out his hand – “I’m Ben Hooper,” he said, “I grew up not far from here in these mountains. My mother was not married when I was born and so I had a pretty rough go of it. The whole community knew it – I was what they called an ‘illegitimate child.’ Back then that

was a shame and so I was ashamed. When I went into town with her, I could see people staring at me, making guesses about who my daddy was. At school the children said ugly things to me, and so I stayed to myself during recess, and I always went home for lunch.

“When I was about 12 years old a new preacher came to our church... Laurel Springs Christian Church. I started going to hear him preach. I don’t know exactly why, but it did something for me. But I was afraid that I wasn’t welcome there, since I was who I was. So I’d go in just in time for the sermon, and when it was over I’d leave quickly because I was afraid that someone would stop me and say, ‘What’s a boy like you doing in **our** church?’

“One Sunday the preacher said the benediction so fast I couldn’t do my usual quick exit. And before I could make it to the door, I felt a hand on my shoulder, a heavy hand. It was the minister. I looked up and he was looking right at me – I could feel every eye in church boring in on me. I knew what he was doing. He was going to make a guess as to who my daddy was. Wouldn’t you know it, even the minister was going to humiliate me. But as he looked at me, studying my face he began to smile a big smile of recognition... as if he knew. “Wait a minute,” he said, “I know who you are. I see a striking resemblance, boy. You are a child of God.” Then he patted me on the shoulder and said, ‘boy, you’ve got an inheritance. You go and claim it.’

The old man looked across the dinner table at Fred Craddock and said, “That was the most important single sentence ever spoken to me. I left the church a different person that morning. In fact, it was really the beginning of my life.” With that the gentleman stood up, shook the hands of Craddock and his wife and moved on to the next table. Later Craddock asked their waitress if she knew who that man was. “Well of course,” she answered, “That’s Ben Hooper, former governor of Tennessee!”

VII. WHO ARE YOU, REALLY?

Who are you, **really**? The single most important sentence spoken to us, was the one uttered at our baptism. When the words were spoken, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” the “who are you, **really**?” question was answered – answered once and forever. Of all the other things we are: single, married, depressed, delighted, career person, retiree, struggling artist, student, underlying all of them – at the center of you, is the unchanging, ineradicable, permanent identity bestowed on you in baptism – an identity set for all time – God has declared, “you are **my** child, beloved and cherished.” As German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg said, “Baptism is there all our lives.”^{iv} Another way of saying: We are – aware or unaware, happy or sad – accepted, the one fact about us that changes everything.

As we recommit ourselves to the God who loves us, let us remember our baptism, and be very, very thankful.

VIII. PRAYER: Lord, in our baptism we were splashed eternally with your love – we left church that day a different person – indeed, it was the beginning of our lives. Lord, help us, by your grace, in remembering our baptism, to remember always and eternally, who and whose we really are.

AMEN AND AMEN.

ⁱ *Lectures on Genesis Chapters 15-20*, vol. 3 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, 165 on Genesis 17:22

ⁱⁱ Rowan Williams, ‘Between the Cherubim: the Empty Tomb and the Empty Throne’, *On Christian Theology*, p. 189.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul Tillich, *You are Accepted* (in *Shaking of the Foundations*), p. 161.

^{iv} Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, (trans) Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, p. 253.