

Baptism-Wet Defiance

Acts 2:37-42

Mark 1:9-11

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***Title Slide**

I have a love-hate relationship with social media. Sometimes, it's just plain hard on my soul...arguing, name-calling, foul language, and horrifying pictures. There are times, I wish the only things allowed would be videos of puppies and kittens or glimpses of other people's vacations. This week, though, I found myself grateful for social media because many of my colleagues were at a conference called the Festival of Homiletics in Washington DC. It's a yearly gathering for clergy where the primary focus is preaching. Social media allowed me to experience just a little bit of what my friends and colleagues were experiencing. They posted videos, pictures, and excerpts from some of the sermons and speeches they heard.

Thursday night, participants from the gathering were part of a worship service and candlelight vigil that ended at the White House. It was organized by Reclaiming Jesus, a group of faith leaders who are encouraging Christians to consider the challenges we face in this nation today in light of Jesus' message of God's justice and inclusive love for everyone. They are hoping to bring us to a place where civil discourse can once again be the norm, instead of the fear-based rhetoric from all sides that has taken over the public sphere.

*Their website has the following statement, "It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography—our identity in Christ precedes every other identity. We pray that our nation will see Jesus' words in us. "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.""

When I got home from work Thursday and had the opportunity to read Facebook posts and tweets from the event, my heart was filled with hope and pride in my colleagues, with a little bit of envy sprinkled in. On Facebook, one of my friends posted a picture of the bulletin from the service that proceeded the vigil. *That* was the picture that planted seeds of envy in my heart. The people leading the service are kind of a big deal in the clergy world...Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggemann, Rev. Jim Wallis, Father Richard Rohr, the Most Rev. Michael Curry (you know the one who spoke at the royal wedding last week), and there were a few Disciples of Christ ministers you might have heard of...Rev. Dr. Stephen Gentle (he's the Senior Minister of National City Christian Church), Rev. Dr. Richard Hamm (former General Minister and President of the CC-DOC), Rev. Dr. Terri Hord Owens (our current General Minister and President), and someone named Rev. Dr. Sharon Watkins.

The message of this event, as you might guess based on the diversity of the leadership, is not about any one brand of Christianity, but about the one idea---that as Christians, we all, evangelicals, progressives, all---ought to be able to get behind: the central message of Jesus, which is pretty clear. God is love and all people have worth, the same worth in the eyes of God. Therefore, as followers of Jesus, our words and actions must reflect that. Our work is to bring about the world Jesus came to proclaim. In his sermon at the Festival of Homiletics, from the Gospel of Mark, Luther Seminary Professor of New Testament, Dr. Matt Skinner, said this, "Faith, in Mark's gospel, is not about believing a particular doctrine, but about having a sense of urgency about God's will emerging." I thought a lot about that this week as I prepared for our baptisms this morning. God's will is for all people to live in a state of wholeness, connected to God and to one another in community. Baptism says yes to that!

I really enjoyed meeting with Ally and Christian in the weeks leading up to today. The best thing about pastor's class, for me, is getting to know the young people a little better. I am under no grand illusion that the participants of pastor's class hang on my every word or will even remember the things I said in class. I hope what they will remember is that when they were young, the minister of the church *chose* to spend time with them. I want them to know they are more than the church of tomorrow, they are part of the church today. They are certainly worth my time and so much more. And honestly, I have to tell you that baptizing people is one of the truly wonderful things about being a minister. Each time I have participated in a baptism, I have experienced God's presence in a very real way. Baptism is holy.

I think it's good for people who want to be baptized to know why baptism is a thing. When I talked to Ally and Christian about baptism, I told them one of the reasons Christians choose to be baptized is that it is something Jesus did. Jesus was baptized, so as followers of Jesus we choose to be baptized. We want to be like him. Here is the story of Jesus' baptism from the Gospel of Mark.

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; [\[h\]](#)with you I am well pleased."

John was a prophet born to announce that God would, very soon, end injustice, exploitation, violence, and death, and reveal the realm of God as a world of justice, compassion, community, and abundant life. John understood Jesus as the Messiah, the one who would bring about the realm of God here on Earth. John's mission was to prepare people for what was to come by inviting them to repent, to turn from the things that separate them from God, and one another, and be baptized.

Baptism symbolizes setting aside our old ways and beginning something new.

The opening of the heavens and the descent of the Spirit like a dove upon Jesus are also symbols, confirming that Jesus was the one God would use to change the world. So that there would be absolutely no doubt about that, a voice from the heavens declared, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Because of the comparison of the Holy Spirit to a dove in this story, and because of all of the doves in the fellowship hall, I’ve been thinking a lot about birds this week. I should tell you, I don’t like birds. That may help you understand the next part of this sermon. It occurs to me that classic pictures of this scene, including the ones in our stained glass, give us the idea that the Spirit, like a dove, descended gently onto the scene.

*But you and I both know that sometimes birds just straight up dive bomb onto the scene, especially when they are protecting their young or trying to pluck a person’s eyes out. Now, think about what you know about the stories of Jesus after his baptism. I feel like Jesus may have been dive bombed by the Spirit.

Jesus’ baptism marked the beginning of his ministry. It was a public acknowledgement of his commitment to work toward bringing about the realm of God in that time and place. The same is true of our own baptism. It is an opportunity for each of us to commit ourselves to the desires of God for the world and the ways of Jesus. But baptism isn’t only about what we will do. In baptism, *God* shows up and does something very, very special. When we are baptized, just as the voice from the heavens declared to Jesus, “You are my Son, the Beloved...” God says to us, “You are my child, you are Beloved, you belong to me.”

The baptism liturgy I use is a little different than you may have heard before. I’ve heard other ministers ask the person being baptized to renounce Satan, his demons, and evil in the world. It is the “repent”

part of “Repent and be baptized.” The way that I would frame that in the Disciples tradition is that the act of baptism itself is a renunciation of all of the competing voices in the world that try to tell us who we are and that affect how we feel about ourselves and how we relate to one another. The world gives us names like screw-up, fat, dumb, lazy, slut, addict, heretic. In baptism, God calls us Beloved. But then the world also beckons us with names like rich, pretty, powerful, bright. But again, God says, “You are Beloved. That is enough.” At our baptism (or confirmation) if you are from a tradition that baptizes infants), we commit to trying to turn away from these loud voices in the world and renounce anything or anyone that tells us we are other than Beloved. In this way, baptism is defiance. The world will always try to define us. In baptism, we say defiantly, “I refuse to believe what the world says about me. I believe I am Beloved and I will do my best to live into that.”

As you might imagine, it is important to me that Ally and Christian really understand that baptism is one way in which God reminds us who we are and whose we are. And so, I told them this very deep theological story. When I was little, every once in a while, on a Friday night, my parents would go out for the evening and my brother and I would have a babysitter.

*On those nights, we were allowed to have McDonald’s food for dinner. My brother, Scott, and I, would sit at the table, eating our cheeseburgers and fries and the scene would always go something like this. Scott, being two years older and quite a bit bigger, would eat his meal very fast. When he finished, he would try, pretty successfully, to steal my fries. It didn’t matter how I tried to shield them from him, he would always manage to get some of them. And it made me very sad.

So, I made a plan. The next time we had McDonald’s, I spread the paper wrapper from my cheeseburger out flat and dumped all of my fries out. And one by one, I picked up the fries and licked them, and then deposited them back in their bag. I looked Scott defiantly in the eyes

and licked every single fry, “These fries belong to me.” Well friends, through the water of baptism, God says, “This child belongs to me.”

Ally and Christian belong to all of us too. In Acts, there is a story about a day when 3000 people were baptized after hearing Peter’s interpretation of the Pentecost event. This is the end of the story:

⁴¹ So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

The ones who were baptized were welcomed into a community that learned, worked, played, ate, and worshipped together. The community had embraced Peter’s message and was committed to working together to share Jesus’ message of God’s love for everyone. While we did not baptize 3000 people here today, we baptized 2, but like the people in the story, Ally and Christian have been welcomed into a pretty amazing community.

*But, the truth is, Ally and Christian, all of us, were welcomed from the beginning. God’s love and welcome aren’t dependent on baptism, but on God and on God’s people making love and welcome real. I am so proud of who we are and who we are growing to be. This church is committed to daily defiance, to the work of justice, equality, liberation, peacemaking, inclusion, and most importantly---love. And that’s what I was thinking as I watched the scenes from Washington DC Thursday evening. It is fabulous that all of those wonderful people gathered at National City Church and the White House to reclaim Jesus. But the real work is in the churches they serve, in the communities they serve. The real work for us, friends, is outside these doors. And today, we welcome two more people to our shared ministry. Happy Baptism Day, Ally and Christian, we love you!

Amen.