

January 12, 2014

Scripture Lessons ~ Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

Sermon *This Is My Beloved*

Well, it was another one of those dilemmas that people face periodically in the ministry and in the church. Many years before the parents of some young people had arrived on the door steps of my church, almost like refugees. They were twin sisters and their boyfriends and they had relatives by marriage in my congregation. They had been thrown out of their stricter churches because one of the twins was expecting a baby out of wedlock. They were welcomed then into the United Church of Christ congregation. They became active productive leaders and both twins who were now married and continued to add to their brood having their children baptized as babies and then raising them as active participants eventually in the church and in the Sunday school.

Then we have to pass forward a few years to when I was at the church and here I was with one daughter from each one of the families in my fourteen member confirmation class which is a challenge in itself, almost on the verge of the day of confirmation. And the dilemma was this. Even though both girls had been baptized as babies their twin's mothers somehow out of the blue had decided that they should remember that baptismal day as they had in their more strict church and wanted them to be re-baptized before they were confirmed. And that was the dilemma. There was pickle that I was in. On one hand the church teaches that there is no such thing that as rebaptism, that their infant baptism was perfectly valid and should never be repeated. Then on the other hand how could we respect the family sincere faith while making this a kind of teaching moment for everybody.

A good dose of wisdom was needed and when into this picture walked two very wise (which we in the East called) elders of the church named

George and Fred. Who hashed through this with me and found a solution which I hoped would address the needs of this situation. Fred was relative to the family and we called him Uncle Fred that insisted that the beliefs of our church be very strictly respected. George was Fred's best friend but held that the family's faith had to be respected in the situation as well. So then arose the grand compromise; we would make clear to the families that beliefs of the church and validity of the infant baptism but at the same time we would create an experience of baptism that the girls would never forget for the rest of their lives.

So how did we do this? Next thing I knew I was waist high in the muddy cold waters of Swatara Creek dunking both girls in the rushing spring water with Uncle Fred and George looking on from the shore with great big grins on their faces as I performed a ceremony we called a reaffirmation of baptismal vows. Wasn't that tricky how we did that, which the church council whole heartily approved by the way? Was it the right thing to do? I don't know. I guess someday I am going to find out. Was the faith in the church and the individuals involved respected and nurtured? I hope it was. Was I darn cold and wet and muddy? Absolutely as a result. It was an interesting, interesting experience which was brings us to our lesson from Matthew Gospel for this morning and how this ties together. It ties together eventually. Have faith in me.

There is some evidence to support the idea that the Judaism in Jesus time encouraged this type of ritual cleaning for converts which John the Baptism, who was probably Jesus' cousin, gave it a kind of new twist and called it baptism. John was offering this new cleansing, baptism, at the River Jordon to anybody who as he put it would repent. And the literally meaning of that word is to turn in a new direction and go after to a new way of living. In fact he had just given the devil to whole bunch of religious leaders who had come for baptism. Leaders which john had sent and had disappeared when who would appear on the horizon, but, from all the way from Galilee, his cousin, Jesus ready for baptism as well. Matthew tells us that John the Baptist must have been sort of taken back because he sort of tried to talk Jesus out of it; asking him a question. "I need to be baptized by you and you come to me for

baptism?” But Jesus responded with an interesting and sort of strange explanation. “Let it be now to fulfill all righteousness” and so when John the Baptist and Matthew tells us about the wonderful things that occurred in the midst of the baptism. The heavens were opened, he said. The spirit of God came down upon Jesus like a dove and then a voice was heard from the heavens. “This is my son, the beloved, (the key word) with whom I am well pleased.” So there you have it. A strange kind of baptismal situation from my past along with the events of Jesus’ own baptism which is recorded for us in St. Matthew’s Gospel.

Now we could spend a few minutes right now on explaining Jesus’ word according to him, to fulfill all righteousness. I could take off on that tangent. We could raise the fact that baptism is one of two sacraments which we Protestants accept because of Jesus’ participation in those of the sacraments or might even debate the merits of infant’s baptism over or against believer’s baptism and argue it from another point of view. I don’t think any of those aspects of baptism hold candle to the phrase that immediately caught my attention when I reread this story: the phrase which I shared with the boys and girls. The words from heaven, “This is my son, this is the beloved with whom I am well pleased” “The beloved, the beloved with whom I am well pleased.”

I suppose it is important to know something about the difference between infant and believer’s baptism. It is a fact it is something I always speak to young parents before their children are baptized. As well as the fact, that baptism is one of two sacraments for Protestants opposed to the seven that are held by the Roman Catholic Church. I always teach that to my confirmation classes but I think what is really important. What is really essential? What really should be bringing those little ones back to the church and all of us to keep us coming back week after week, for month after month, for year after year are those words of God “You are my beloved I am pleased with you “

Because of all the commandments; of all the stories from Scriptures that we see as important, even essential to our Christian faith. First and foremost is this that our baptism is the tangible reminder through God’s

Holy Spirit that we are the beloved of God; and that God cherishes us more than anything else in all of creation. I am going to say that again, our baptism is a reminder to us through God's Holy Spirit; we are the beloved of God and that God cherishes us more than anything else in all of God's creation. I could talk until I am blue in my face, and work on this calling, until the day I die. If we don't believe that with all of our hearts about ourselves and about all the people around us in the world, we might as well pack it in. We might as well pack it in because that is what it is all about. So St Matthew said, a voice from heaven said "This is my Son, this is the beloved with whom I am well pleased."

And together we say AMEN