

January 8 2017

Scripture Lesson

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34-43

Sermon *What is Baptism?*

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters”

“The voice of the Lord is powerful”

“The voice of the Lord is full of majesty”

“The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars”

“The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire”

“The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness”

“The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare.”

These words from Psalm 29 emphasize the way the voice of the Lord is heard by breaking through the natural order of things. Hear now of another time when God’s voice broke into history.

Matthew 3:13-17, p. 881

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’

But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ Then he consented.

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

Most of you remember the TV show All in the Family, which starred Carrol O’Conner as Archie Bunker (the loveable bigot.) In one of the episodes Archie wanted to have his grandson baptized. The child’s parents, Meathead and Gloria, did not favor what they thought was insignificant and unimportant. Archie, even with all his faults, knew the importance of baptism. At the end of the show Archie told the child’s parents that he was taking the baby for a walk. In a dimly lit church, not far from home, during a serious and moving part of the TV show, Archie administered baptism on his own grandson. Archie had it right, baptism is important.

My own son-in-law had a similar experience. Shortly after I first met him I asked him if he had been baptized. He told me that even though his parents were not church going people, his grandmother was a devout Catholic. He told me that when he was but an infant his grandmother took him to church and sprinkled holy

water on him. I don't think that means he is baptized, but at least his grandmother was trying to do something, because she realized it was important. What else could a grandmother do without cooperation from his parents?

Baptism, what is it? What does it do?

Let me give you a short history of baptism. The antecedents of Christian baptism are found within Judaism. In common with other nations the Jews were accustomed to use water for the purpose of religious purification. A specialized use of water was found in the practice of proselyte baptism, one of the ceremonies by which new converts were admitted into Judaism. It is probable that this baptism was an act of self-dedication to the God of Israel.

John the Baptist developed a concept of a water baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Whereas the Jews had used baptism as an initiation of Gentiles who were converting to the Jewish understanding of faith; John baptized Jews (and maybe Gentiles) who were repenting. His baptism was for repentance, not conversion. John also links the rite of baptism with his proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God. John's baptism is a rite of moral purification designed to prepare those submitting to it for the approaching "kingdom of God."

See yourself as one of the members of the crowd that day along the riverbank. John is a very colorful and controversial figure who thrives in the wilderness along the Jordan. People flock to him and his ministry. They hear things about the future that other religious leaders don't tell them. John has baptized many persons, but now there is a man with John who seems to be arguing with John. Why? This stranger wants to be baptized and John doesn't want to do it. John is saying he is not worthy to baptize this other man, but the other man is even more forceful in his argument that John is to baptize him. John relents. Who is this man?

Jesus submitted himself to John's baptism. He said it was proper that he be baptized "to fulfill all righteousness;" which meant that he was doing the revealed will of God.

The rite of baptism with water as the symbol of entry into the Christian community was practiced from the day of Pentecost onward as this baptism symbol used by John became a central image for the developing churches. It was closely linked to repentance and with the reception of the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts reports that Peter said to the crowd gathered at Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you."

Do you remember your own baptism? Some of you probably do. I remember mine. I was about twelve. I knew the significance of what I was doing. Carefully, I read the Bible daily for several weeks in advance; trying to make sure that I was in the proper state of mind on the big day. And it was a big day for me; very memorable, very important. That was my first baptism – I now believe it should have been my last.

Eight years after my first baptism I was persuaded that I should be baptized again. This makes sense if we believe that baptism is **only** symbolic of what God has already done in our hearts. After I entered a new phase of spirituality in my life I felt that I must somehow symbolically express that experience publicly.

However, I now believe baptism serves the double function of symbolically witnessing to our faith *and* that God somehow works on us through baptism. To put it more simply: baptism is not a human action alone but the double action of human response *and* **divine blessing**. The question seems to me to be: Did God do anything in the event of my first baptism? If God did something: Is not God's action sufficient? How can I, a human being, add to the sufficiency of God's action? I believe that God more than makes up for any insufficiency on my part. You see, if God does something in our baptisms – there is no reason to be baptized again. In fact, to be re-baptized seems to me to be the same as saying, “Yes, but God didn't do enough. God's action was insufficient.” Consequently, I now wish I had been baptized but once.

I am an ordained Disciple of Christ minister. As Disciples we baptize by immersion. We baptize that way because we believe Jesus was baptized that way. Do we think that baptism must be by immersion? As someone once said, “if a little grape juice and bread will do for communion, why not a little water for baptism?” Disciples have in general, in my lifetime, come to the position that we recognize the legitimacy of baptisms done by sprinkling or pouring. When my former wife, Barbara, became a Disciple, her baptism in the Presbyterian church was recognized as legitimate and she was not asked to be baptized again.

Barbara was baptized as an infant. There is scriptural precedent which hints that this might be the accepted practice in the New Testament church when, as in Acts 16:15, Lydia and her household were baptized. Some scholars believe that the purpose of including the phrase “and her household,” found here and at other places in scripture, was to indicate that all family members – irrespective of age – were baptized. Some scholars argue that Christian infant baptism took the place of the Jewish practice of circumcision. Just as the Jew is to be initiated into his faith by circumcision, the Christian is to be initiated by baptism. Both of the rituals are the promise of faithful parents to raise their children in the faith. These rituals are also testimonies to the world that the baby is intended to be one of God's own.

Many of us tend to see some justification for infant baptism; enough that we recognize the validity of those baptized in this way when they seek to join our church. Nevertheless, we maintain our historic preference for believer's baptism by baptizing by immersion when someone expresses a desire to be baptized here. Our historic preference for immersion is based upon scripture which tells us Jesus “came up from the water” (Matthew 3:16). We also notice that when Phillip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch he was said to do “down into the water” (Acts 8:39).

The image of death, burial and resurrection are also best seen through immersion.

In Paul's letters, however, he seems to be emphasizing *the state* we have achieved as part of "the body of Christ" more than he is concerned with the way it was accomplished.

I think in today's text Matthew is also saying something about our baptism. Our baptism is a submission to the righteousness of God, our public declaration of our membership in the movement of a righteous God.

Just as that day Jesus publicly stood before the whole world and showed a way of being with God which the world found hard to understand, so you, every time you submit to God's will rather than your own will, show forth, in a public way, the righteousness of God. You are showing, when you live in righteousness, that you are taking God's will more seriously than your own.

Obedience to the will of God, through baptism and through righteous living, rather than being an oppressive burden, can be seen as a great gift. *It is a great gift to have our lives caught up in something larger than ourselves.*

If you have not been baptized – wouldn't today be a wonderful time to make a decision to be baptized? Through this action you would be claiming a faith in Jesus as the Christ, and God would, I believe, be making a claim on you. Being baptized would be your way of declaring to the world that you are willing to serve in the service of a righteous God. Baptism is a Christian's model for disciplining oneself to the desires of God.

If you have been baptized: celebrate your baptism! If you have not been baptized: you and God need to have a talk!