

A sermon preached on January 13th, 2019 – The Baptism of Our Lord Sunday -- based upon Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:15-17; 21-22)

There are moments in life that come to us when suddenly there is an opening – a creative movement of the Holy Spirit – in which, should we choose to respond there is the possibility of seeing our lives with a much greater clarity and to make a decisive choice to live more closely aligned with the Kingdom of God – too live life with more abundance. One hope of mine for this sermon would be that you would be open to that possibility in your own life.

Fred Craddock, a retired preaching professor tells a story from a vacation in Tennessee he and his wife were making way back in the sixties. There were having breakfast in a diner and distinguished-looking elderly gentlemen was going from table to table talking with people. Fred thought to himself, I hope he doesn't come here, but sure enough he did. "Where you folks from?" he asked. "Arkansas", Fred answered. "What do you do for a living?" "I'm a seminary professor," answered Fred. At which point the elderly gentleman sat down. "I've got a great preacher story for you."

He proceeded to describe how he was born to a mother "out of wedlock" in a town near there. He grew up aware of a sense of shame hanging over his life – the question of "Who's your Daddy?" an object of gossip and mockery. At school he would hang back during recess so as to avoid the torment of other children taunting him with the question.

When the man was twelve a new preacher came to his church. Interested in hearing the new preacher, he would go to church late and then slip out early allowing him to hide out in the shadows, avoiding have to interact with anyone. But one Sunday he somehow got distracted and missed his opportunity to sneak out, Suddenly there was a big hand on his shoulder. It was the preacher. "Son, who's your Daddy?" the he asked. The boy froze unable to respond and aware that people were watching.

"Wait a minute!" said the preacher. "I know who you are. I see the family resemblance now. You are a child of God!" With that he patted the boy on his shoulder and said, "Boy, you've got a great inheritance. Go claim it."

The old man got up from the table and said, “isn’t that a great story?” Fred agreed that it was. Just before he walked away the man said, “You know, if that new preacher hadn’t told me that I wasn’t one of God’s children, I probably never would have amounted to anything.”

Afterwards Fred asked the waitress who the man was. “Why that’s Ben Hooper. He was a two term governor of our state.”

I looked Ben Hooper up. He did some great things for the state of Tennessee.

The original example of such a moment identity clarifying grace is found in our story this morning. Jesus showed up at the River Jordan with all those ordinary people yearning for new life and decided to enter the waters alongside them to be baptized by John. He heard God claim him as his beloved son, with whom he was well pleased and it seems to have been a decisive turning point in his life.

If I were to ask you what at its heart is baptism all about? I suspect you might not know because the baptisms we are familiar with are mostly that of adorable little babies so full of life receiving a light sprinkling of water on their heads.

This however is what baptism is about: Death – and resurrection – but death first.

This point would have been obvious at to those in attendance at John’s baptism, as well as to people experiencing adult baptisms today that take place in rivers. The one being baptized is dunked – a kind of symbolic drowning – before being raised back up out of the waters to new life. A death takes place so that resurrection can be experienced. It’s a kind of dress rehearsal for our actual deaths.

There is an interesting twist in Luke’s telling of this story that you probably missed because we are so familiar with the versions found in Matthew and Mark. In what you just heard, when did Jesus hear the voice of God and receive the Spirit?

I suspect you would say that it was when Jesus came up out of the water following his dunking. But Luke actually said it happened a bit later:

“Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

In Luke’s telling, the decisive moment happened afterwards when Jesus was praying and presumably reflecting on what had just happened.

Why does Luke tell the story this way? Apparently he is less interested in the actual moment of baptism as he is in the life that followed. He downplays the singular moment of baptism to emphasize a way of life – a baptism-shaped life.

There is another subtle but significant bit of editing that Luke does later in his Gospel when Jesus talks to his disciples about what it means to be his followers: *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross **daily** and follow me.”*

In the same way we likely miss the heart of what baptism means, we often miss the significance of a cross because it is so familiar to us as a piece of jewelry. A cross is one thing and one thing only: an instrument of execution – of symbol for death.

And when Jesus tells us to take up our cross, Luke adds the word “daily.” The point is this isn’t a once and done deal. It is a daily, hourly – indeed moment by moment process of dying and rising with Jesus.

Luke’s Gospel is the one that most emphasizes prayer. Jesus’ is praying when he hears the voice of God and the gift of the Spirit and he is described taking time to pray several times throughout the Gospel.

If you think about prayer as done by Jesus it is a very intentional act in the present moment in which we willingly offer ourselves to God – we willingly put to death something so that something greater can rise in its place.

So what is it that needs to die?

Well, one way to talk about that which needs to die is to speak of our “egos” – our whole approach to life in which we put ourselves at the middle of everything.

But describing it this way can be misleading because it can sound rather depressing. “All right I’ll stop being so selfish. I won’t think of my own needs.” If that is all it means Christianity is a pretty gloomy thing indeed.

Let’s go back to the example of Ben Hooper. What happened in that moment when – through the voice of the preacher -- he heard the voice of God claiming him as God’s child?

I would suggest Ben began putting to death his sense of shame – his need for approval from the people of his town -- that kept him back from fully living his life. He put to death his need for their permission and his impulse to hide in the shadows.

With the directive of God he began putting this toxicity to death and began to go forth to let his light shine rather than hiding it under a bushel.

And consider what this would mean. In order to let his light shine he had to be willing to take certain risks. Maybe he puts forth an idea and everybody in the room shoots it down. Perhaps he runs for a political office and he loses by a landslide.

Having been claimed already as God’s beloved child Ben could take these risks because his sense of being worthy of love had already been established and could not be jeopardized by experiences of failure. And so moment by moment, in obedience to God, the voices in his head that said “go hide your light” were put to death so that he could claim his inheritance.

I am repeatedly drawn to the wisdom of AA and the twelve steps which arose from alcoholics seeking sobriety but which actually are applicable to some degree to the lives of all of us. The twelve steps seek to describe what a “baptismal life” looks like. In opening themselves to this wisdom, countless lives have experienced the grace by which to move from various forms of bondage to greater freedom to be their best selves.

At the very beginning of the twelve steps is the recognition that what we think of as ourselves – also referred to as the ego – clings with a destructive kind of pride to the belief in its ability effectively run our lives. The truth is that this pride or “ego” over time eventually runs our lives into the ground.

So the first step in AA is, *“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.”*

A great humbling must take place. We must begin developing the habit of putting this destructive form of pride to death one day at a time.

The second step is this: *“Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”* (This is what is being pictured in our story. Having submitting himself to his “death” – letting go of the tight reins by which he sought to direct his life up to that moment -- the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove to empower his life moving forward.)

And the third step is: *“Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.”* The twelve steps doesn’t get distracted by arguments over doctrine but rather keeps the focus on the movement of the heart that is commonly referred to as “surrender.” There is, however a working proposition offered here that the “higher power” is on our side, seeking to lead us towards a greater wholeness. It is in harmony with what for me is the fundamental assertion of Christianity that the One who is ultimately in charge has the nature of unconditional love.

In our passage, John the Baptist declares that when the messiah comes, he will *separate the wheat from the chaff*. Most often this is interpreted as referring to the dividing the good people from the bad. But what this really is about is recognizing the wheat and chaff in ourselves.

Typically in our normal way of operating in this world we find it very difficult to take a hard, honest look at ourselves acknowledging the parts of ourselves that need to change – the things that need to “die.” If we admit these things about ourselves it feels as if we will have no choice but to despair – to pass judgment upon ourselves as being unworthy of love.

But if we can take to heart the message that the one who created us cherishes us as beloved children – that there is far more to us than our faults – then this perceived threat brought about by honest self-reflection will be lessened.

So the fourth and fifth steps are: *“Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”*

The sorts of flaws that we might acknowledge run the gamut. Maybe we are too passive or too aggressive with others. Maybe we are lazy or maybe we are a work addict. Maybe we have

betrayed trusts or maybe we've been anxious to please others in a way that compromised our true selves. Maybe we've failed to be the best friend, parent, child, spouse we are capable of being in a variety of different ways. In other words, there isn't just one thing we might find that needs changing.

There is great wisdom in the simplicity of the serenity prayer which AA so often recites: *"Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change that which I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."*

We cause ourselves great misery by obsessing over that which we cannot change in life. We complain, we hold grudges – against others and towards ourselves – rather than accepting what cannot be changed. And often we find it easier to focus our attention on what can't change than to look at that which can be changed – and what most often can be changed is something about how we are approaching our lives.

And finally, a big part of the wisdom of AA is that this intentional journey of the baptismal life occurs best when it is lived out in the context of a supportive community in company of others who are also seeking to do the same. That is why AA groups help the recovering alcoholic. That is why a church that has fellow pilgrims willing to be vulnerable in seeking to walk humbly with the Lord is so critical for us in our quest to live a resurrection life.