Newness of Life

Romans 6:3-11 Kimby Young

Matthew 3:3-17 January 15, 2017

Traditionally, the second scripture considered during the church season of Epiphany is the baptism of Jesus Christ. It is the lectionary reading every year from one of the gospels. Churches around the world focus on baptism, and many share a reaffirmation of baptism covenant which we will share later today. In some ways, the scripture for today from Matthew – that act of Jesus being baptized by John in the river Jordan is a little confusing. Sometimes people ask – why was Jesus baptized? - If John the Baptist was preaching repentance against sin and offering baptism as a sign of that repentance, why was Jesus baptized? Wasn’t Jesus without sin? He had no evil to wash away – no need for redemption. Jesus is the one who provides redemption, who frees us from sin. Why should Jesus have been baptized? But this scripture not only raises that question, it also answers it for us. This scripture provides helpful clarification about baptism. Because Jesus chose to be baptized, we can understand more about what baptism means to us.

Baptism is about belonging, connection to God. It is not some “magic ritual” and it is not necessary for salvation. God’s love is not bound by religious ritual. Rather our sacraments express and expand God’s grace in the world. Sometimes people believe that before baptism we are dirty and evil and sinful, and that through baptism our sins are washed away, that after baptism we are pure and clean and sinless. While the symbolism is there to suggest washing, it is not the ritual that makes us clean, it’s not the action of the water that changes us – it is God’s action in our lives that changes us, that frees us from sin. The water of baptism reminds us that God’s grace pours over us, whether we ask for it or not. God loves us, forgives us, and calls us to righteous living. Baptism doesn’t make us immune to sin or temptation. In fact, the very next thing that happens to Jesus after his baptism is his temptation in the wilderness. Rather baptism reminds us of the power of God over sin, the grace of God which lifts us to new life in Christ, the Spirit of God who empowers us to fight temptation, to conquer evil and to start anew. Baptism is about choosing your allegiance – choosing which power we will rely on. Will we give in to the power of evil, will we try to rely on our own strength, or will we trust in the power of God? Baptism says we will rely on God’s power, God’s grace, God’s mercy, God’s strength, to guide us through each day and lift us into new possibilities for tomorrow. Baptism says we belong to God, we will serve God, and God will save us and equip us for service in the world.

We baptize babies, as well as adults, to remind us that it is not our strength that saves us, it is God’s strength. It is not our choice that saves us. It is God’s grace. And God’s grace empowers us to make good choices as we seek to serve God in the world. We are helpless as babies to save ourselves. It is God’s grace that gives us power to grow and to live and to act as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.

When Jesus chose to be baptized, Jesus became an example to us of how to live as God’s servant in the world, how to live as ones who choose God. In Jesus’ baptism, Jesus declared at least three things. Jesus renounced sin. Jesus said publicly he would serve God. And Jesus received God’s blessing.

First, Jesus renounced sin. Jesus said evil has no power over him, or over us. Jesus declared that the only power in his life was and would always be God and God alone. This was not a new recognition to Jesus; he had always lived that way. But in his baptism, Jesus declared that faith before all the world. Jesus said publicly, “I will do God’s will – and only God’s will.” Jesus said there would be no other power in his life than God. Not only would Jesus renounce evil, but Jesus would turn away from any other worldly power. Jesus would not seek fame or fortune or popularity or power. Jesus declared through his baptism that he would only do God’s will. God was first in his life.

Second, at his baptism, Jesus said publicly that he would serve God. This was his declaration of commitment to ministry, his commissioning. Jesus’ baptism marked the beginning of his public ministry. And from this point on in the gospel, Jesus publicly serves God and does God’s will – even to the point of death on the cross.

And third, Jesus’ baptism also marks God’s public affirmation of Jesus. The gospel records that the heavens opened up, the Spirit of God came down, and the voice of God said, “You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.” In our own baptisms, God says, “I love you. You are mine.” The passage from Romans which we read for today talks about our connection to Jesus through baptism, what happened in Jesus’ baptism is what happens in our baptisms. God affirms us and says, “I love you.”

We are united with Christ so that we too have the power of God to live as Jesus lived, to serve God in the world as Jesus did, to share God’s love in the world. So when you are baptized you are saying, or your family and community of faith are saying for you, the same three things Jesus said.

In baptism we are saying we renounce evil and rely on God’s power alone. We say God is the greatest power and God is able to conquer evil.

In baptism we are saying we will serve God in the world, we will be ministers of God’s love in the world; we will be disciples of Jesus Christ working for justice, peace, freedom, wholeness, human fulfillment and all that God calls us to be and to do.

In baptism we are saying that we know – we are God’s beloved children – you and I.

We know, God loves us – God loves me. God loves you. God loves each one of us.

And God’s love, God’s grace, empowers us to share that love wherever we go.

In a moment in our worship service, we will share a Reaffirmation of Baptism Covenant in which we will reaffirm the vows taken during our baptisms. You will be asked to make that public declaration – that you renounce evil, that you trust God in Jesus Christ, and that you will serve God by sharing God’s love in the world.

Baptism is not just a one day commitment. It’s not just sprinkling water and looking cute. It’s not just symbolism. It is a lifelong commitment. Baptism is about a whole new life – newness of life – living every day renewed and recommitted to God’s service.

That’s what our reaffirmation of baptism in a few minutes is all about – remembering God’s grace to us, and recommitting to be God’s beloved child in the world.

Hear again, receive again God’s blessing for you. “You are God’s beloved child with whom God is well pleased.” Accept that gift of God’s blessing. Renew your personal commitment to trust God, and to serve God all of your days.

In the Presbyterian tradition, whenever we have a baptism, the liturgy from the book of common worship closes with the phrase, “See what love the Father has for us that we should be called children of God, and so we are.” Hear that affirmation again and believe – children of God – You are God’s beloved. God is well pleased with you. God knows and loves you. God calls you to new life and God gives you everything you need to live fully and faithfully. Hear and believe. We are children of God. “You are God’s beloved child.” Live in God’s love and serve God.