

LELC Baptism of Our Lord 2019

Maybe at the beginning of service today you were thinking, “Didn’t we just sing that “On Jordan’s Banks” song in Advent? What is up with that?” It is the way of the lectionary, go figure, that today, the first Sunday after Epiphany, we have a day just to hear again the story of Jesus being baptized by John. It comes in Epiphany because Epiphany is all about the ways Jesus is revealed to be someone special, someone divine. In Epiphany we hear all the stories about how the people around Jesus figured out he was not just your average dude. Stories of Magi, doves and voices from clouds, water into wine, healings and miracles. They all point to Jesus as God’s Son.

This account of Jesus at the Jordan river is also a really great day to focus on Baptism in general. We just had a baptism last week. If you were here maybe you remember it. Little Joseph. He was pretty cute. Before that a couple of weeks was little Nichole. She was adorbs too. All that cuteness of most baptisms these days is why I make a habit of always telling Confirmation kids, when they are getting ready to affirm their baptism in the rite of Confirmation, about what baptisms were probably like back in the day, back in the day of the early Church and Jesus’ earliest followers. It was nothing like the photo op that baptism is today.

Back in the early Church, becoming a follower of Jesus was about the most counter-cultural thing a person could do. No self-respecting Roman citizen or upstanding member of respectable society would ever do such a thing. Being a part of that Jesus freak group meant you would be hanging out with the riff-raff of society: the undesirables, like prostitutes and sinners, unclean people, people who didn’t matter. You were chasing after some delusional idea of a community that tried to live out radical welcome (everybody), and mutual care (like sharing food) and equality across all the barriers (like slave and free, Jew and Greek, male and female – unheard of!!!)

Becoming part of this woo-woo “Body of Christ” thing, (whatever that was) was going against all that society stood for, and risking one’s place in the social standing, which meant ‘adios’ to your future wealth and position. It was not something that a person did lightly. That’s what Lent was originally for, for people to study and pray over whether they were ready to take such a big step, to make such a big change in their life.

When the moment of their baptism did come, the person was asked to face the west, the direction of death and the setting sun. make a 3-fold renunciation. (Same renunciation we did this just last week)

Do you renounce the devil and all the forces that defy God? I renounce them.

Do you renounce the powers of this world that rebel against God? I renounce them.

Do you renounce the ways of sin that draw you away from God? I renounce them.

It was the way of asking if the person was renouncing the rat race of the world, the one where the rats win. Where the rich just got richer and nobody cared about the poor or sick because their suffering was their own fault.

And then, - and this is the part the Confirmation kids love - some texts indicate that after the person got done renouncing, they would spit, as a final unequivocal act of rejection of everything that would draw them away from the God of love they knew through Jesus. I kind of wish we did that 3-fold renunciation every week, to remind ourselves of the constancy of sin and the forces of evil that are trying to draw us away from God.

Then the one about to be baptized would turn and face the East, toward the rising Sun and the direction from which Jesus would return. And they would make a 3-fold affirmation: I believe, (trust) in God the Father, who creates and provides all things for all the people. And the Son who showed us exactly what self-giving love looks like, and the Holy Spirit those whose power we are enabled to live the transformed life to which God calls us. And then the water, the water of death and rebirth as a follower of Jesus, a person choosing to live a new life in community with other people of this way of radical self-giving love. When parents found out, they would weep, or even disown their sons or daughters. They would be social pariahs in that society.

You have to ask, when you think about what it meant to those first few generations of Jesus followers, “Why?” Why in heaven’s name would they choose to forego everything their world had to offer them, to be a part of this fringe group of spiritual weirdos? Was it just the deep hunger for a new kind of social order, a desperate hope for that new kind of kingdom that Jesus had called the Kingdom of God - something better than the business as usual that was the Roman Empire and all its subservient fiefdoms? Maybe. But I don’t think it explains why people followed Jesus instead of just joining up with some bunch of rebels trying to overthrow Rome.

No, I think there was something even deeper going on among people who chose to be baptized into the community of people who followed Jesus. The deepest reason, and perhaps the very root of it all, was this message that Jesus proclaimed, first by his words and then by his actions, was that they – and we – are beloved children of God. Each one of us, like Jesus at his baptism, are named Beloved. Beloved Son, Beloved Daughter. Beloved by God - the creator of the Universe.

Through parable and teaching, Jesus told them that a person’s worth was not based on who their family was. Nor on what race they were or whether or not they were a citizen. It was not a matter of strength, or prowess, intellect or business acumen. It was not about how good you were at stuff, or how rich or powerful you were. Your worth

was a matter of the truth that God loves you. And God names you beloved, special, of infinite worth. You matter. You matter because God says so.

Look around the world a little bit. Think a bit about all the hurting that happens in the world. People don't hurt other people because they are acting out of their deep sense of being loved. People do the horrible, hurtful things they do because deep down they feel unloved. Every single encounter of ugly hatefulness has at its root someone who does NOT know in the core of their being they are loved. People who judge others feel judged. People who hate never felt loved. People who are full of greed are acting out of a deep-seated sense of never feeling they were enough. And the only, only, only thing that ever can begin to change hearts empty of love is to begin to know that we are loved.

That is what makes (and made) the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ so world-transforming. We can argue over doctrinal details, but in the big picture, it all comes back to the heart of the matter, the message, "You are loved. Through the life and teaching, the death and resurrection of Jesus, you are beloved of God.

Now, is baptism some cosmic switch, something we do, that makes God love us? No. God loves us all already. But baptism is the tangible expression of the intangible truth. Baptism is the vessel, the means by which the gift of God's unconditional love is given to us to experience, to know is true. We can know by water and Word that we matter more than we can comprehend. We are given to know that we have been given a new kind of life, a life that includes infinite do-overs when we screw up. We are given a place as part of a community where we belong, and where we have a purpose as part of the community that lives out God's love with those who don't know it yet.

What was true for the first generations of Jesus followers is still true. We all need to know that we are loved. We all need to know we are welcome, we belong. We all need to know that we have a purpose, that we matter. In our baptism God gives us to know it is all true. We are loved. We matter. And so does everyone else.

Now, it does seem to me church folks actually have the harder challenge. It is way too easy for church-y folks to get confused, to start to think that they are the ones who are righteous do-gooders. It is way too easy for church folks to start judging people who aren't as good as we are. We have a bad habit of judging folks who aren't like us or who don't agree with us. That unfortunate habit needs to be exactly what drives us back into the arms of God's mercy and forgiveness. Our baptism can remind us that God's love for us can even overcome our self-righteousness. Thank God for that.

In our baptism, whenever that happened for us, God named us beloved. God called us to leave behind an old life, to live a new life, a transformed life in Christ, in love, in daring

community in which all are welcome. Here at Lake Edge you talk about daring to embody the Gospel. I hope that means you are daring to embody the barrier-busting unconditional love God has for all humankind, all of creation. The love in which we all matter; we all, each and every one, are beloved of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.