
Committing to Love

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 7 July 2024

Ezekiel 1:26-2:5 • 2 Corinthians 12:2-10 • Matthew 3:13-17



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Our Gospel passage today is a familiar one. Jesus comes to his cousin John, who have been proclaiming his coming to all who will hear. Jesus asks to be baptised, but John is shocked — why? Wouldn't John want to do the same blessed and life-giving service for Jesus as he has for all the people who have come to him? Why did he try to change Jesus' mind about this?

The answer is in what John has been telling the crowds: "I baptise you with water to show that you have repented" (Matthew 3:11). The people who came to him "confessed their sins, and he baptised them in the Jordan" (3:6). But how can I baptise Jesus for his sins, thinks John, when Jesus doesn't have any sins? Much more should Jesus be baptising me, for I am a sinful man!

Baptism is a beginning, an initiation. God washes away all our sins, and we may start clean. We often say this, but what does it mean? What does it mean to start clean? You might think of baptism as an opening, a preparation of the human spirit to receive the divine Spirit, the Holy Spirit. Until we are baptised, either as a child or as an adult, we are not able to be fully connected to God. We are not able to know God until we have accepted that divine gift of the Holy Spirit.

The church has for hundreds of years restricted the giving of Communion to those who are baptised. Many have relaxed this practice in recent years, and my own practice is that I will never ask — if someone comes forward to ask for Communion, I will give it. I feel it is between that person and God. I do believe that when baptised persons receive Communion it reinforces and renews our membership in the body of Jesus, which is the holy gathering of Christians, God's people. The one who is not yet baptised does not belong to that gathering, and so the taking of bread and wine will not have the same meaning. I believe it will still carry some blessing, as it is the gift of Christ to us; but it is not the same.

Does this seem exclusive? It is actually inclusive, as God welcomes everybody to join in the family of God. Anyone can attend a church service, but making a commitment to God is a step beyond, and it is not exclusive of God to give more to those who make that commitment. This is not so different from any human relationship. Any connection between father and son, mother and daughter, husband and wife, brother and sister, rests on a spoken or unspoken commitment between the two parties. The relationship you have when you commit to a wife or husband or best friend is different, and richer, than the one you have with just an acquaintance. Indeed, the connection of Jesus to us is, ideally, replicated in the connection between human beings. We are called to be imitators of Christ, and Christ became incarnate as a human being so that we could relate to him, as a human being. God did not choose lightly to send Christ to be born of a human woman — it is part of God's plan to give us a path to understanding and acceptance. If Jesus were not fully human (as well as fully divine), he would not be such a model to us, and we would not have such direct access to him now. Jesus knew what it was to be a human being, and so could know our fears, our joys, our troubles and our loves. And in knowing Christ, we too transcend our own experiences as human beings and touch a little bit of the divine.

All of this begins with baptism. Even babies or little children will hold in themselves the blessing of knowing the relationship to God which they do not yet understand, but will understand and appreciate as they grow older. They are given the key to coming into full Communion later in life. This understanding

may lie dormant for some time, or it may begin to grow immediately, as God sees fit. So the connection we make today will bear fruit far beyond this Sunday.

And so let us give thanks once again to the God who is gracious and welcoming and wants us to come closer to him, and draws us in to love him. Thanks be to God our Father, Jesus our friend, brother and redeemer, and the Holy Spirit, our advocate and guide. Amen.