

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
First Sunday after the Epiphany

The Baptism of our Lord
Year A, RCL



Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 29
Matthew 3:13-17

The Collect

Father in heaven, who at the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan proclaimed him your beloved Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit: Grant that all who are baptized into his Name may keep the covenant they have made, and boldly confess him as Lord and Savior; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, in glory everlasting. Amen.

Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who

ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

Psalm 29 Page 620, BCP

Afferte Domino

- 1 Ascribe to the LORD, you gods,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
- 2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his Name;
worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.
- 3 The voice of the LORD is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders;
the LORD is upon the mighty waters.
- 4 The voice of the LORD is a powerful voice;
the voice of the LORD is a voice of splendor.
- 5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedar trees;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon;
- 6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Mount Hermon like a young wild ox.
- 7 The voice of the LORD splits the flames of fire;
the voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- 8 The voice of the LORD makes the oak trees writhe
and strips the forests bare.
- 9 And in the temple of the LORD
all are crying, "Glory!"
- 10 The LORD sits enthroned above the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as King for evermore.
- 11 The LORD shall give strength to his people;
the LORD shall give his people the blessing of peace.

Matthew 3:13-17

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 fulfill 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.”

SERMON

The scene is the banks of the River Jordan. There is a large crowd about. John the Baptist, a wide leather belt around his waist, is going and coming from the water, hand in hand with those who have come to be baptized when a man from Galilee appears. John knows him well and exclaims, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”

The man from Galilee replies simply, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.”

Thus, Matthew plays out for us one of the most puzzling passages in the Gospel — the baptism of Jesus. Why would Jesus need to be baptized? What sins were to be washed away from the man from Galilee? And what does He mean by the cryptic words “... to fulfill all righteousness”?

The Presbyterian Church cleaves to infant baptism. That means that we speak of parents “presenting their children for baptism”, reflecting the Presbyterian understanding that God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ is prior to and calls forth such a response in faith from the parents. The account we have today is of an adult baptism, closer to the understanding of my tradition, in which the one to be baptized is an active participant. In that understanding, one “submits” to baptism. An adult believer’s baptism involves submission of self to God. It is this sort of baptism which is being described. In submitting to baptism, Jesus is submitting his entire self to the call the Father has for him. The waters of baptism do not wash Jesus clean of sin, but clean of self. Jesus has embarked upon his walk to the cross.

Centuries ago, John Calvin, to whose understanding the Presbyterian church looks, said, “We are not our

own, but the Lord's." The crucial factor in the Christian life, he said, is that "we are consecrated and dedicated to God." This means that "we may think, speak, meditate, or do anything only with a view to [the divine] glory." That is what the Second Helvetic Confession means when it explains that in baptism "the elect are consecrated to God." More recently, that is also what "A New Brief Statement of Faith" means when it begins with the phrase, "In life and in death we belong to God."¹

That is some revolutionary stuff! I wonder if that message still reverberates in today's society. I wonder if it still reverberates within individual congregations. In life and in death we are consecrated to God. That's a breath taking assertion! Can it still claim currency in today's churches? If it does, how are we to work out our

¹ Reprinted from the June 1995 issue of the Presbyterian Survey (now Presbyterians Today)

consecration?

These questions form the structure of our challenge as Christians, for God calls each of us to different tasks, but He does so within the structure of the church. If every man went about doing what he firmly was convinced God had called him to do, there would be chaos. The certainty of the religious fanatic is the enemy of faith and so we are called as members of the body of Christ so that we may submit ourselves to the clarity of community. It is that sacrifice of the individual, the abandonment of self, which is so very, very difficult for Americans, in particular, to grasp for we see ourselves as rugged individualists.

I am not my own, but the Lord's. Can you grasp the enormity of such a confession? I am not my own, but the Lord's. How are we to live into that confession? Jesus submitted to baptism and washed away self. He

washed away self-concern for success in the world, for a happy family life, for the respect of the religious leaders of the time, for the chance to go fishing just for fish. Can we say that this sort of commitment still drives the contemporary church? The bishop's complaint is this: "Everywhere Jesus went there was revolution. Everywhere I go, people serve tea."

To get a feel for how revolutionary a thought this is, look at our passage from Acts. The context is a meeting between Peter and a Roman centurion named Cornelius. It was a meeting that never would have happened if the two men had listened to their common sense. Both men, as we shall see, had very good reasons to avoid this meeting, reasons which would have been respected by any sensible person of the time. That the meeting **did** occur shows us how revolutionary a story we are reading.

How so? Glad you asked. Peter was an observant Jew. It is hard for us to connect with the enormous problem that presented to Peter in terms of answering the invitation Cornelius' men will soon bring him. To be a Jew is to be obedient to the laws of *kashrut*, the purity laws. Jews could not visit in Gentile homes because if you went into a Gentile home, let alone ate at a Gentile's table, there is no end to the forbidden objects you might come into contact with. To a Jew, righteousness is found in obedience to *Torah*. To hold to his faith, Peter could have but one answer to Cornelius' men, and that answer would be "No". So why did Peter agree to do exactly the wrong thing for a Jew to do? Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, tells us:

About noon ... Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and

something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. Then he heard a voice saying, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But Peter said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean.' The voice said to him again, a second time, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

The message is clear. You are not your own, with your own idea of righteousness. You are the Lord's. If you are called to a Gentile house, you are to go.

Cornelius was a centurion of the Italian cohort. A centurion was an officer in charge of 100 soldiers. The centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. Cornelius was an important, trusted Roman soldier in an uncomfortable, potentially dangerous, position. He was a "God-fearer", a man drawn to Judaism and the wor-

ship of God, but nonetheless an uncircumcised Gentile. His position is uncomfortable because Romans generally viewed monotheists as little more than heathens. The Jewish faith was respected because it was ancient, but still, as to the Roman pantheon of gods, Jews were atheists, you might say. They did not honor the gods. When in Rome, do as the Romans do but the Jews didn't. Just knowing how people are, it appears to me that choosing to be a God-fearer would not be a good career move for a Roman soldier and bad career moves would affect more people than just Cornelius for he had a large household to support. He was a wealthy man. He had responsibilities to his household and his family. All that was about to be risked. He was a God-fearer and he had need of a meeting with Peter. Luke tells us:

One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God

coming in and saying to him, ‘Cornelius.’ He stared at him in terror and said, ‘What is it, Lord?’ He answered, ‘Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter.

It is bad enough that he does not honor the Roman gods. Now, he’s seeing visions. This is beginning to look like a career-killer for Cornelius. Cornelius’ rejection of the Roman gods could only harm his career and the lives of everyone dependent on him so refusing to send his men to fetch Peter, vision or no vision, is the only safe and sensible course for him. Peter’s faithful insistence on cleaving to God’s covenant with his people could only be admired by his co-religionists, so saying “No” to Cornelius’ invitation is the only sensible course for him, as well, and he has the entirety of *Torah* to which to point to justify his decision. Nevertheless,

both men submitted themselves to the call God had for them and Peter went to Caesarea to bring the story to Cornelius and his whole household.

The bishop's complaint is that we have lost our connection with the radical teachings of Jesus and substituted for them a neutered, ineffective and inoffensive sort of tea party. It is as if we had decided that it is sufficient to graph the frequencies of each of the notes played by an orchestra and substitute that for listening to the music but both Peter and Cornelius were driven by a need to hear and respond to the music. It is a willingness to submit yourself to the melody, to be one who confesses that I am not my own, I am the Lord's, which is the crucial factor in the Christian life.

I feel the need to address one other thing here. We are not speaking of religious beliefs, but of submission of self. Anthony de Mello wrote:

“A religious belief is not a statement of Reality but a clue about something that is a mystery, beyond the grasp of human thought. In short, a religious belief is only a finger pointing to the moon. Some religious people never get beyond the study of the finger. ... Rare indeed is the religionist who is sufficiently detached from the finger to see what it is indicating. These are those who, having gone beyond belief, are taken for blasphemers.²

Both Peter and Cornelius would be taken for blasphemers by their associates but they were faithful to God’s melody, despite the consequences. Indeed, so difficult is this to do that we are told that Peter later backed off and that Paul confronted him to his face over his lack of courage.

Peter did that which was strictly prohibited by the Scriptures because God called him to a task. Cornelius, the God fearer, put his comfort, his wealth and position

² Awakening: Conversations with the Masters (Anthony De Mello)

and the welfare of those dependent upon him at risk for the same reason. Jesus took the first step to the cross. All these men were “fulfilling all righteousness”, for it is only from loss of self that righteousness may be pursued.

So we are back to the bishop’s complaint, “Everywhere Jesus went there was revolution. Everywhere I go, people serve tea.” Churches are safe environments for our children. Churches offer fellowship and a place where we can gather with others of like mind and praise God for his mercy. The question I would like you to pray over this week is this: Does Calvin’s assertion – that the crucial factor in the Christian life is “We are consecrated and dedicated to God, that we are not our own, but the Lord’s” – still retain currency in our churches? How does this assertion color your life? Do you believe it to be true, church?

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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