

Adam's Reflections: January 2019

January 10

If there has been one theological question that has remained consistent through my ministry it has to be the topic of baptism, and specifically the topic of rebaptism. This Sunday is the traditional time in the life of the church to hear the scripture of Jesus baptism. This year the text comes from Luke and as we read it, we might be surprised to hear the casual nature of Jesus baptism. Unlike Matthew, we have no protest of John, just a few words about Jesus being baptized, the Holy Spirit descending upon him and a voice from heaven declaring pleasure about what had happened. The central focus of the text is clearly what is being done from above, the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the voice claiming Jesus as Son. This gives us some clarity of how we should view our baptism as well.

There is clearly some decision making process at work when we arrive at the baptismal font. Either we as individuals or people willing to speak for us as infants make a choice to be present. We answer a few questions affirming our faith and belief in Christian doctrine but the real work is happening outside of our control. If we believe that baptism is the washing away of sin and a rite of inclusion into the Church, all of that happens independently of our action. Our sins have been cleansed by the obedience of Christ upon the cross and the Church as the body of Christ is our recognition of the restorative work of Jesus. All of this points towards the idea that baptism is about what God is doing and not what we are doing. We obviously have a part in the process but the main actor is God. With God acting we can affirm that nothing will go wrong at baptism. This does not mean that we will be free from sin, or that we will stumble on the journey from time to time. This does not mean that we are free from doing the work we are called to or that we will have no worries in life. What it does mean is that the work of baptism sticks to us in a divine way and does not need to be repeated. From this theological point of view, rebaptism would mean that somehow what God did at our baptism did not work. Whereas most of the things I do don't work, God has a much better success rate, you could even say he is perfect.

Other faith traditions will come to this topic from a different theological point of view, but as United Methodists this is our heritage. This is why we acknowledge the baptism of infants. This is why we accept one baptism, no matter who did it or where or when. (Water and Trinity required) On Sunday we will renew our baptismal vows and there will be opportunity to be marked with the water of the font and we can rest in the knowledge that at our baptism God made no mistakes and that we are forever a part of God's grace.

TL/DR

Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price.

January 18

Through the advent of innovations in travel and communication, we live in a much smaller world than 125 years ago. In our own communities, we can encounter people from all over the world. With a little time and money we can travel to just about anywhere we desire as well, very few places are inaccessible in the world today. Even if we are unable to travel, technology exists for us to know places better than we ever have in the past. TV, internet, satellite mapping and a variety of other technologies exist that bring us all closer together. In the midst of all that diversity there is a temptation to look at others with a distinct sense of difference, which at times can lead to misunderstanding or even hostility. These differences are real, for example, the cultures of China and Western Europe are distinctly different, with each having developed over centuries of separation, focusing on different priorities and ways of seeing the world. Understanding those differences and being able to appreciate them is an ongoing challenge in our shrinking world.

In the midst of those differences though are still some common bonds that we all share. Paul reminds the church of Corinth this in his letter to them, specifically 12: 1-11, best summarized as many gifts, one spirit. Even though the Corinthians were not having arguments about different cultures as much as personal differences, the point applies on a variety of levels. Paul encourages them to see and appreciate the value of others for what they share in common not what makes them different. He continues in chapter 12 and 13 to highlight the need for those differences for us to function as God intended us and to allow that functioning to be grounded in love.

As we continue our journey as Otterbein it is a good reminder for us to have before us. Our differences, whether they be personal, denominational, cultural or something else, are not something to divide us if we stay grounded in love and acknowledging the Spirit working through all of us. An easy reminder, but a challenge to live out each and every day.

January 24

Last Thursday I went back home to Doe Hill to say goodbye to a friend. I pause every time I describe Glen Botkin, Jr. as a friend but I have yet to find a word that suffices. I knew him for the entirety of my life. We lived in the same community, went to church together, he was a youth leader, I went to school with his children, I worked for him (briefly between jobs). Yes, he was a friend, but he was more than that as well. I can think of no word to adequately describe who he was, and what he meant in my life.

It took his passing, to truly reflect on all the ways his life impacted mine, especially since much of what I took from his presence occurred when I was growing up. It is often easy for us to acknowledge the ways our parents shaped who we are, in both the good and not so good ways that people close to us influence who we are, but only in passing had I stopped to acknowledge those other influences in my life. Glen Jr was one of

those people. His ability to diffuse a stressful situation with a grin and a laugh was always welcome. His joy for telling stories and relating the quirkiness of life always made me appreciate the time we spent together. His fearless way of approaching life, coupled with an amazing work ethic were inspiring and daunting. His presence, along with my family and others in our community clearly shaped who I am today. The thread that ran through all of those childhood interactions was the church, specifically, Doe Hill UMC and by extension the other three churches on the charge.

When I think about where our world seems to be headed in regards to the importance of church, what grieves me the most is the loss of the type of community I experienced as I was growing up. Knowing God can be a very personal experience that is different for everyone, but knowing how to be a Christian is best learned in a community that values the journey and growth that we strive for together. My experiences at church shaped me in ways that I still discover when I pause long enough to reflect on them. Most of us would agree that without formative experiences in a loving community our lives would be less complete. Our challenge in continuing that work is reminding people that church is more than a personal relationship with Jesus. That is only one portion of why we come together as community. Knowing Jesus might be the most important aspect of church but if it is the only part we are missing so much of what being a Christian is about.

January 31

Our Old Testament lectionary text for this week is [Jeremiah 1: 4-10](#) and it will be the text shared at Saturday Night Alive. It challenges us in ways to examine our own call from God. When we read call stories in the Bible it is very tempting to look at the details of what those people are called to do and immediately dismiss our own call as been much less grand. In many ways this is true. Few of us are called to the same tasks as Jeremiah and we should be thankful for that. On the other hand, examining what is actually happening in this text is key to our understanding of call.

Jeremiah receives a word from God. Each of us should be able to say with some certainty that God has created us for a purpose. We might not always be clear on what that means. We might not always think that it is important, but we can affirm through scriptures such as this that God intends for us to do something and has gifted us with the ability to do so, as well as the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Jeremiah also does what almost all of us do, provides an excuse for why he could not possibly heed God's call. "I am only a boy" he proclaims. Our excuses will differ, too old, too young, too tired, too proud, too scared, and many might seem valid. It is only natural for us to resist God's call, we are often called to challenging things that stretch the bounds of who we think we are. Being able to see ourselves as God sees us is often the real challenge of answering our call.

We see this in the final portion of the scripture. God's comfort to Jeremiah, "do not be afraid for I am with you". God gives Jeremiah peace and the ability to do what needs to be done. For Jeremiah that manifests in having the right words to proclaim to Judah. For us that will look different for each of us, but we can rest assured that God will not call us to something that we are incapable of doing. God also gives Jeremiah the ability to act on his behalf. The ability to build and destroy is given to Jeremiah, tasks that seem to be more aligned with what God does not authority given to humans. This reminds us that we as mere humans are incorporated into God's work. The tasks that Jesus does in his life, become the tasks we are called to. Those words from Isaiah repeated in Luke that we heard last Sunday:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Those are our words as well. Acknowledging our place in the Kingdom and the importance of what we do is vital to our understanding of call. It might challenge you to think this way, but as we humbly admit our weakness we also must adhere to the importance of what we are called to do. Our work at being better disciples in 2019 is in part so we can do a better job of hearing and responding to the call upon each of our lives.