Springfield Presbyterian Church

May 5th, 2024

A Baptism for All

1. A place to begin

This morning, our short New Testament text from Acts may seem like an interesting place to begin. We will celebrate Pentecost in a few weeks, yet Peter’s interaction with the Spirit comes eight chapters after our well-known Pentecost text. It is fair to ask – what is happening here? What is Peter up to, and why are his actions radical?

The first place we want to start is in knowing our main protagonist – Peter. We’ve heard all about him through Lent, so we know that he is a flawed disciple with a lot of love for God. He’s certainly had his ups and downs – he has proclaimed who Jesus is on the mountaintop and has also been called ‘Satan’ in a moment of despair. Yet, before Jesus left the disciples for the last time, Jesus sees so much in Peter that he gives him the keys to the church. He essentially tells Peter that he is the one who will build up the church that we see today.

1. Acts

In the book of Acts, we hear a great deal about Peter, but in this particular part, Peter is on a journey. In the verses before the one we heard today, he tells the people before him that he saw Jesus and he knows that God shows no partiality. As Peter tells the people before him the news of Jesus Christ, who are Gentiles, the Holy Spirit falls upon them and they become believers. He then baptizes them, and he spends time in fellowship with them.

The verses after our reading share that he was harshly criticized for baptizing Gentiles. When he tells them the story and the power of the Holy Spirit, they eventually come around – but they see Peter’s act as radical.

1. Why was it so radical?

Now that we have some information about Peter and what he is

doing in this chapter, we come to the crux of the why this is so important. He baptized Gentiles. Gentiles and Jews are essentially enemies. There is a clear division that has been there for centuries, and with the Holy Spirit in tow, Peter says, “No, our God is for all. This is a baptism for all.”

When we look around us, it is easy to see these dual worlds, and the thought of opposing sides finding common ground can be difficult. Can you imagine having the strongest believers of every political party in the US sit down for dinner and have a jovial conversation? Can you see individuals of different countries with different languages and viewpoints all sharing in one common bond? Can you dream of the wealthiest and poorest communities gathered together, sharing a cup of coffee or tea?

If you are cynical, if this seems far off and an impossibility – I’m not going to lie to you, I kind of feel the same way. It’s human to feel cynical here – because the world becomes more and more divided as the decades carry on. It can be hard to see or find people of different viewpoints or cultural norms working together toward a common good. You can begin to ask yourself where hope can be found.

1. Renewal

Well, maybe Peter’s narrative can give us a little bit of hope as

we encounter the world together. What Peter did that day was radical – to baptize Gentiles was outright radical and a disruption of centuries of division. Can we be that radical? Can we see the Spirit at work and see that God shows no partiality?

We say it and we say it often – all are beloved children of God. All are offered the baptismal waters. There is no line of division. There is no cut-off here. There are no questions about worthiness, credentials, or previous good acts. There is a simple, “Yes” – a simple “yes” to accepting God’s redeeming and reviving baptismal waters.

And this comes from a pastoral point of view, (note, this is Pastor Becca speaking here) – if someone were to walk up to me on Main Street and say, “Would you baptize me?” Any day of the week, the answer will always be, “yes.” Now, might I have a curious question or two, like, “do you believe in Jesus?” or “why would you like to be baptized?” But regardless, the answer is always in the affirmative, because when the Holy Spirit shows up, we have to show up too.

I remember some powerfully sacred moments when I worked in an urban trauma-one hospital in Philadelphia, where I was asked to baptize under often strenuous circumstances. I do not recall ever asking the parents their exact faith tradition or inquiring into their “why – why they wanted this to happen?” What I know is that they called, they felt it was important and as a chaplain and a pastor, my first call is to be a vessel of God’s love. That means I don’t go around judging their baptismal reasons, but I ushered a number of babies in my arms and poured water on their heads and reminded them that they are so loved, so deeply wanted and cared for, and called beloved. As I write this, I still feel shivers, because those sacred acts still move me today.

What I am trying to share though, through these examples, is that baptism is a gift, a holy grace, a blessing and an acknowledgment of who and whose we are. Whether someone is baptized as a baby, or as an adult, or in fact, never baptized at all – the truth remains the same: God shows no partiality. God’s love extends beyond our understanding and our small boxes that often does no one any favors. God’s baptismal waters, just like Peter saw on that day, are for everyone.

V. Where now?

So, what does this mean for you and me, here today, here now? First, it is a day where we can be grateful for our baptism. We can let the wonder of it all capture us for a moment, and give thanks to God that God calls us all beloved. There’s a real invitation here for deep and abiding gratitude.

That’s, perhaps though, the easier part. If we are called to emulate God, then we show no partiality as well. We say that this table, the table that Jesus would invite all to – even the man who would knowingly betray him – is a table for everyone. We have no right to cut anyone off from the love of God, nor do we have the power to do so. This can even be as basic as the golden rule – love your neighbor as yourself. So, go sit at tables where conversations will be difficult and see if you can find some common ground. Be in relationship with someone of a different faith and instead of feeling any temptation to pull one person to your side, can you sit together and see the value and teaching of what your traditions tell you? Journey alongside someone who occasionally makes your blood pressure rise, (just sometimes, we want you to stay healthy) – but in that rise of blood pressure, you may find that as you feel challenged, you learn something you would have never imagined.

So go from this place and be grateful. Go from this place and be radical. Go from this place and emulate Jesus, in all you do and in all you say. Alleluia and amen.