

January 22, 2017

*"Baptism Thoughts"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 3:1,2,5,11,13-17

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

Today, I want to share with you some thoughts and comments on why it's important to remember our baptism. To start, have you ever heard the term "baptism under fire." It actually comes from the verse we heard today from St. Matthew where John the Baptist refers to Jesus and says, "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." With fire. Now keep that in mind as I tell you this story. The other day John and I went to a restaurant to eat, and we sat at the bar. Like I mentioned once before, we learned in seminary, that if you ever need some good ideas for a sermon, just go to a local bar with a pen and a cocktail napkin, and you'll get all the fodder you need. Well, we spotted this one older gentleman who was wearing a baseball cap with the words. "World War II Veteran" on the front. John said to me, "He's pretty young looking to be a World War II vet. Let's say he was 18 years old in 1945, the last year of the war. That would have to make him almost 90 years old. But he sure looks a lot younger than that. Do you think he's really a vet?" So, I decided to find out. I went over and started talking to him. Well, it turned out he was actually 92 years old. His name was Matthew. And let me tell you, he was as spry and feisty as they come. He said to me, "When I saw you coming over, I thought you were going to try to pick me up." We had a good laugh, but then, after a while, he told me his story. He said, "It was my bad luck that I turned 18 years old in 1943. So to avoid being drafted into the Army, I thought I would see the world by joining the Navy." And he saw it, alright, the hard way. He was assigned to the USS Bennett, a destroyer in the Pacific. You can google the Bennett, and see that the young Matthew saw action in the Solomon Islands, Guadalcanal, Bougainville, the Marianas, Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. All those very infamous places. He told me his ship was almost sunk when it was hit by a kamikaze pilot. Fortunately, they were able to limp back to shore for repairs. But four sailors were burned to death, and Matthew had to help sew the canvas body bags together so they could bury them at sea. He said being 18, when he first joined up to fight, the idea of "fighting," in his mind, was something you might do with bullies in the schoolyard. But after his first real action at sea, with planes in the air shooting at them, explosions in the water and in the sky, he said he went and sat in a corner, all curled up, thinking, "I could die in this kind of fighting." He said it was his "baptism under fire," and it is something he would never forget. And here it is, almost three quarters of a century ago, and he remembers it like it was just yesterday. He added, "Yes, that baptism under fire made a significant impact on how I look at my life and live my life." And likewise, our Christian baptism, should make a significant impact on how we look at our life and live our life.

Our scripture today takes us to the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized. And we sang that great African American spiritual, *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*, about that river. And the words are comforting, aren't they: "The Jordan River is deep and wide, but there's milk and honey on the other side. The Jordan River is chilly and cold, chills the body but not the soul." Yes, the Jordan River is probably the most famous river in the world because it is the river of God. For it is a river that flows with love and grace and acceptance and transformation. We heard that in today's Scripture. Because as Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, we see God's Holy Spirit come upon him, and we hear God say, "This is my beloved child, with him I am well pleased." Don't you want to hear God say those words about you? This event, Jesus' baptism, transforms his life. For it marks the beginning of his ministry in the world. From this point on, Jesus will go about the business of fulfilling the plan and purpose God has for him. The business of being a light where there is darkness in the world, of offering compassion and hope and love in a world so badly in need of it. And as he is immersed into the darkness of the water, and then rises up and out of the water, he knows it is a precursor to his death and the darkness of the tomb, and then rising in resurrection to new life, which he promises to us as well. And so baptism has significance for us, both for our earthly life and for our eternal life. You see, that's the "I've got a home on the other side" referred to in the song.

So let's remember our baptism for a moment. In the baptismal service, we are asked, "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior?" "Do you put your whole trust in His grace?" "Do you promise to serve him as your Lord?" And thus our Christian journey begins. It all sounds wonderful, doesn't it? But let me ask.... In reality, how much meaning and value do we really put on our baptism? Do we even think about it? And how are we doing in keeping that promise to live as a faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. That's really the business we should be about. Think about it for a moment...are you right on target? Way off the mark? Or, are you pretty close? Now I would guess most of us sitting here today might respond, "I'm pretty close." And that might make us all feel pretty good. But should we? Should we feel good about just being "pretty close?"

Let me give you an illustration. I'm sure all of you can remember a time in your life when you were driving down the road and experienced a near miss. Someone ran a stop sign, or crossed the center line coming at you, or screeched to a halt right behind you. Whatever it was, remember your reaction? Your heart started pounding, your body shook, you started hyperventilating, you felt sick to your stomach. We've all experienced this. Once, when it happened to me, John said, "Honey, don't get upset. Calm down. A miss is as good as a mile." A miss is as good as a mile. You see, whether the

person came this close, “pretty close,” or whether the person was “a mile” away, that person didn’t reach you, didn’t touch you, didn’t impact you. Do you see where I’m going here? Pretty close is a good thing when it comes to automobile accidents, and, even horseshoes for that matter. But “pretty close” shouldn't be our goal when it comes to living as a disciple of Christ. He either does reach you fully, does touch you fully, does impact you fully, or he doesn't. As famous missionary Hudson Taylor said, “He is either Lord of all, or he is not Lord at all.” Remember that baptismal promise to “serve him as your Lord?” You see, our business in this life should be about us, too, being a beacon of light, compassion, hope and love in this world. And when we come only “pretty close” to this, we can easily fall into the routine of just maintaining a status quo, allowing the trials, sorrows and frustrations of this life to weigh us down, turn us into lukewarm Christians, even becoming indifferent about our faith.

You know, I don’t often quote Winnie the Pooh, but he once said, “Sometimes, if you stand on a bridge and lean over to watch the river slipping slowly away beneath you, you will suddenly know everything there is to be known.” And that’s true. My new WWII Veteran friend, Matthew, felt it. His gun position was at the stern, the back of the Bennett, the "fantail" as they call it, just four feet above the water line. And he mentioned that he would sometimes just stand there and watch the water pass by underneath, and reflect on what this life is all about. And that's what we are to do at the Jordan River.

Fred Craddock tells the story about Frank, a man who finally figured out what life was all about. Craddock says he once served in a small town where a group of men always met in the local café every day to discuss the news, weather, cattle, and crops, whatever. Not doing any harm, just letting their time slip away. He writes, "The patron saint of the group was a man named Frank. Frank was 77 years old when I met him. He was a good, strong man, an independent man. A pioneer, a rancher and a farmer. He was born in a sod house, he had all the credentials, and all men at the local café considered him their patron saint. 'Ha', they'd say, 'You'll never find old Frank in church.' Well, I met Frank on the street one time. He knew I was a preacher, but it never was my custom to accost people in the name of Jesus Christ. So I just shook hands and visited with him, but he took the offensive. He was not offensive, but he took the offensive. He said, 'I work hard, take care my family, and mind my own business.' 'I mind my own business! Far as I'm concerned, everything else, including church, is just fluff.' You see, that's what he told me. 'Leave me alone.' So I didn't bother Frank. That's why I, and the entire church, and the whole town, was surprised, and the men at the café were absolutely befuddled, when Frank, 77 years old, presented himself before me one Sunday morning to be baptized. And I baptized Frank. Some of the talk in the community was, 'Frank must be sick.' 'Frank must be scared to meet his maker. They say

he's got heart trouble.' All kinds of stories. But this is the way that Frank told it to me. We were talking about his baptism and I said, 'Frank, you remember that little saying you used to give me so much, I work hard, I take care of my family, I mind my own business, and everything else is just fluff.' He said, 'Yeah, I remember, I said that a lot.' I said, 'You still gonna say that?' He said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Then what's the difference?' He said, 'I didn't know at the time what my business was.' You see, Frank finally realized that his business was God's business."

And so today, let us open ourselves to let God's river of love and grace and acceptance and transformation flow in us and through us, to this world in need. Today, as we remember our baptism, let us make way for God's grace, let us commit to attend to the business of Jesus Christ. And then let us hear God say to each one of us, "You (too) are my beloved son, my beloved daughter, in you I am well pleased." Amen.