

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

1st Sunday after Epiphany

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Text: Mark 1:4-11/Acts

Title: “Bread, Bath and Beyond: Bath”

Lynn and I went with some friends to see the movie “Selma” the other night. It’s the story of the civil rights movement as it took shape in Selma, Alabama. I’ll confess from the start that I’ve read a great deal about Martin Luther King, Jr., and the movement he led for 13 years. I was just a young boy when it was all happening but I remember the day he was shot asking my mother what happened when the program on TV was interrupted and news of an assassination was dominating the screen. I remember standing in front of the black and white TV watching and listening.

The movement and the injustices that made it necessary raise deep feelings within my soul. When I watched the movie’s opening scenes, one of which involved four young girls walking down the stairs of their own church talking away, enjoying each other’s company and then the bomb went off, the rage I feel over the injustice of such an act frightens me, to be honest. The incredible self-control MLK and those who created change through non-violence along with him seem far from my capabilities when that kind of injustice happens. I feel the potential in myself for violent retribution when I think of such things.

The same is true of other acts of injustice against the innocent like the terrorist acts in Paris last week or the shooting of the 12 year old boy who held a toy gun in Cleveland weeks ago or the murder of police officers in New York City not long after that. I don’t know how what your reactions to such things might be, but for me such violence arising out of fear and hatred leave me churning within, troubled in spirit and soul.

We are exposed, aren’t we, to the potential ugliness of the human being in such violence? We know that fear and hatred do have a real presence in the world and that injustices do still occur to people who don’t deserve what they receive. And sometimes it might not be a human being imposing the injustice. Sometimes it may be a more impersonal cancer diagnosis or a premature departure of a loved one or unfair treatment at work when the one who is better at politics gets the promotion and not the more deserving one who has integrity but less interest in ladder climbing. The world is not a perfect place, is it? And even a new year doesn’t change that fact. What can we hold onto in such times when injustices happen and we find ourselves troubled in spirit and soul? And how can we be part of building a better way than the way of anger, hatred and violence?

Let’s turn to the Gospel of Mark and the book of Acts and see if we can find some help. Jesus in today’s passage has come to John the Baptist for baptism. John is the one preparing the

way for Jesus. John is the one who has been calling people to repentance, to turn their lives around and reorient them to focus on God and to be cleansed by the waters of baptism that they might be free from the sin that binds them. John is a rather odd character, dressing in the clothing of a wilderness prophet and preaching scathing indictments against those coming to him for baptism calling them a brood of snakes. John was not the calm, reserved pastor but rather a blunt, forceful proclaimer of the need to confess and repent and receive the gift of God's mercy through forgiveness through the waters of baptism. I doubt that John would have made a good pastoral counselor. Yet, somehow people came to the river to pray and be baptized in the cool waters of the Jordan to receive the unburdening that John's baptism offered.

I wonder about the gift of being unburdened. Do you know what I mean? I wonder about those who continued to come to hear this wild prophet call them "snakes" and at the same time called them to repent of their sins and turn toward God and then to be symbolically cleansed in the waters of baptism. It was an act of being released from the sins that bound them.

Much to my family's dismay, one of my favorite movies is "O, Brother Where Art Thou". In it there is a scene of baptism. Maybe you remember it. The three escaped convicts come upon a church service happening at the river where those who've prepared for baptism stand in line in white robes on the river's edge waiting their turn to be baptized by the preacher. They're all singing:

"As I went down to the river to pray,
carrying about that good old way
and who shall wear the starry crown.
Good Lord, show me the way.

O sister, let's go down.
Let's go down.
Don'tcha wanna go down?
O sister, let's go down,
down to the river to pray."

Delmar, one of the convicts, is mesmerized by the whole affair. So captured is he by the whole thing that he can't help himself. He is so burdened by the way he has lived his life that he finds himself thrashing through the water to get in line to receive the gift of unburdening as he is baptized along with the white robed congregation. And as he makes his way back to his friends standing dumfounded on the river's edge, he throws his wet arms wide in the joy of forgiveness with a wide smile on his face inviting his friends to join him because the "water is fine". It's as if he has taken a spiritual bath and been cleansed from all that has troubled him, freed from the chains that bound him.

That's John's baptism, and it's a beautiful thing. Sometimes people need to be freed from past ways of living, past hurts caused or endured, past patterns of totally ignoring God and others. Sometimes we need John's baptism of unburdening in order to experience the gift of God's mercy and the freedom from whatever chains that bind us.

But Jesus' baptism is something else. John gives us a clue as he told the crowds in the Gospel According to Mark,

“The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Paul makes the same distinction in the book of Acts as he comes to Ephesus and finds some disciples. He asks them if they’ve received the Holy Spirit when they became believers.

“No,” they say, “we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”

“Into what then were you baptized?”

“John’s baptism,” they say.

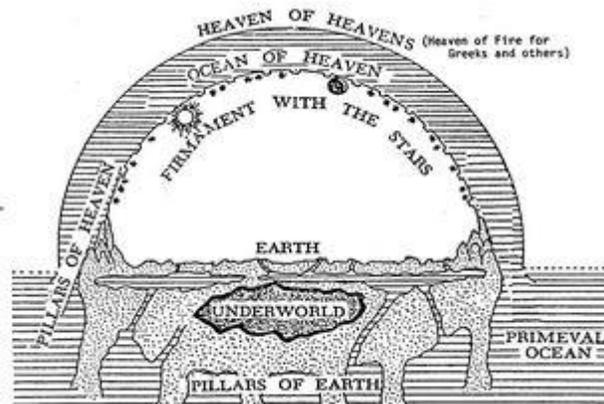
“John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— ⁷ altogether there were about twelve of them.

What I hear in all of this is that John offers the gift of unburdening but Jesus offers another gift: the gift of God’s Holy Spirit. You might ask, “Well, what does that mean really?” The way I hear Jesus’ baptism in Mark’s Gospel is that when Jesus walks into the river, it’s an act of total and complete surrender. Jesus’ baptism is about giving himself completely—without reservation--to God. Theologians have argued--and some still do--about whether Jesus needed to repent given the conviction that he was sinless and so should not have needed baptizing by the one calling for repentance. But what if this was Jesus’ act of complete surrender and not about confession? What if this was Jesus’ way of acting out what it means to turn completely toward God? Because, what happens when Jesus rises from the cool waters of the Jordan dripping wet? Mark’s Gospel describes it this way:

“he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’”

In order to get a clearer sense of what’s happening here I want to show you a drawing of the concept of the universe according to the OT times. In Genesis the first creation story describes God creating order out of chaos or “formless void” as other translations have it. The first day, light was created and on the second day this:

⁶And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” ⁷So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. ⁸God called the dome Sky.



So heaven is separated from earth by this dome God created and the idea was that God primarily occupied the place of heaven above the dome, while human beings occupied the space under the dome on earth. Well, in the baptism of Jesus when in Mark Jesus sees heaven torn apart—and this is a radical action of tearing—the barrier between God and human beings is destroyed, eliminated. That’s the image here. No longer are human beings separated from God but in Jesus’ life God is present to all on earth and always will be because as Jesus comes to surrender himself completely to God the Holy Spirit comes. The barrier is eliminated.

Now there is something else. The Greek verb used for “torn apart” is only used one other time in the Gospel According to Mark. Anyone know where that might be? What else is torn apart in this Gospel account? At the point of Jesus’ death on the cross, the temple curtain is torn apart from top to bottom. The temple curtain was used to divide the worship space in the temple. Behind it was the Holy of Holies which is where the Ark of the Covenant was kept. The Ark of the Covenant housed the original 10 commandments and was thought to be the dwelling place of God. Only the priest could go behind the curtain. That space is symbolized in the configuration of traditional sanctuaries like this one in which we have a division between where the congregation sits and the chancel area where worship leaders are.

Jesus’ baptism destroys one barrier and it points all the way to the cross in which his death destroys another barrier between God and human beings and his resurrection destroys the ultimate barrier between us and God: death itself. So in his baptism all the divisions between us and God are gone, and then we hear this beautiful affirmation: “You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.”

The word “beloved” is derived from the Greek “agape”. Now there are three words in Greek for love: “eros” which has to do with sexual intimacy. We get our word “erotic” from “eros”. “Philos” has to do with the affection of friendship. Philadelphia is the city of brotherly love. But “agape” is different. “Agape” has to do with sacrificial love. “Agape” has to do with laying one’s life down for someone else. “Agape” isn’t just about warm feelings of affection. “Agape” is Jesus surrendering completely to God, and then it’s about Jesus saying, “Do you want to know what ‘agape’ looks like? Let me show you.” As he stretches his arms out on the cross, “It’s about laying down your life for someone else.”

In the class on marriage that Lynn and I are facilitating, we heard the story of John and Denise told by Adam Hamilton, the writer of the book we are using as our guide in the study.

John and Denise were founding members of the congregation Hamilton established in Leawood, Kansas. Denise had suffered from a brain tumor during their time in that congregation and treatment had been successful. It stayed in remission for many years, but 3 or 4 years down the road the tumor returned, and it became clear that subsequent treatment would not be successful.

As it took hold on her, family and friends watched as her capacities were slowly diminished. And then at some point, they moved in order to be closer to family. One day John called Adam and told him that Denise was near the end, would he pray for her. Hamilton said he'd like to come see her, so he drove to their home, knocked on the door. John yelled for him to come in. The door was unlocked. Invited Adam to come upstairs where John had just finished giving Denise a bath and had her dressed. He then carefully picked his wife up in his arms and carried her down the stairs to the kitchen table. Sat her in a chair and then fixed them some bologna sandwiches for lunch. Hamilton watched as John fed her and then wiped her chin when it needed it. When they were done with lunch, they prayed together asking God to give Denise comfort and peace, to be with her in this transition she was making.

And then, Hamilton left. He said he sat in his car and wept because what he had just witnessed in his friends: that was "agape". That is what marriage is about. That is what God's love is about and when Jesus is called "beloved" by God, God's Son, that is the kind of love God is expressing for Jesus, that kind of care, that kind of sacrifice, that kind of devotion. And that my friends comes only through the gift of God's Holy Spirit where all barriers between us and God are torn apart.

Whenever I get riled up within because of yet another report of violence or injustice carried out because of fear or anger or hatred, I remember that these things are not of God, not the God known in the waters of baptism in which Jesus surrenders his life and is called beloved Son, not the one in which the Holy Spirit comes to tear apart the barriers between us and God, not the One through whom we see what "agape" looks like, sacrificing and serving.

You and I are called to proclaim the better way and live our lives devoted to the One who shows us that "agape" is the way of God. You and I are called to remember that the barriers have already been torn apart. So if you need to repent and be cleansed this morning, then the water is here for you to remember you've been baptized and are free from the chains that bind you. And if you want to surrender again your life to God completely, the water is here to remind you that God claims you as beloved son or daughter. And if you want to make a new start with God the water is here to invite you to turn around and focus on God again—or maybe for the first time. If you haven't been baptized and would like to be baptized, then please speak with me after the service and we will make that happen. Otherwise, come, dip your hand in the water and touch your forehead. Remember your baptism and be thankful.