

Saved to Serve the Whole World

January 13, 2019

Luke 3: 15-17 and 21-22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of His sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His granary; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire."

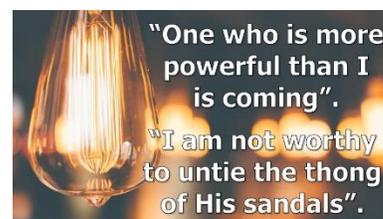
²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."



As we join our passage today, we find John the Baptist hard at work in the Jordan River wilderness. There is an urgency and perhaps a desperation to John's message.

John is drawing quite a crowd, baptizing people every day, changing lots of people's lives, drawing many people closer to God. Naturally some people are beginning to wonder if John might just be the Messiah. But John knows his purpose – to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. John knows that the Messiah is coming soon. How would our lives be different if we spoke of our faith with the urgency and energy that John brought to those who came out to see him in the wilderness? Imagine how our world would change! Let us pray...

In response to people's wondering if he were the Messiah, John gives them some perspective. He knows that Jesus is and will be far above himself. Yes, for John, his ministry was helping people come closer to God and he was making a difference in people's lives. But John knew full well that the baptism that he was offering was only water, it was only symbolic. John tells his audience, *"One who is more powerful than I is coming"*. John recognized that God had empowered him to be in ministry. But he also realized that Jesus was the Son of God, that Jesus was God in the flesh. To help others understand how superior Jesus would be, John says, *"I am not worthy to untie the thong of His sandals"*. Today we may say that we couldn't hold a candle to him or her. Or perhaps we would say something like we are not even in their league. As disciples, we should model this as well. Just as John the Baptist did, we should always try and point others to Jesus as the One who gives life and hope.

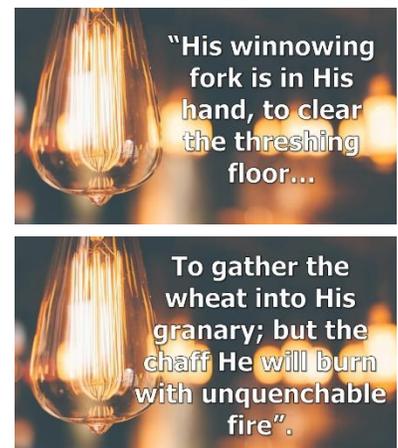


John does know that the baptism that Jesus offers is very different. In fact, John knows that Jesus will offer two baptisms. The first is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is the gift of God himself, coming to dwell in the believer. As Methodists, when we baptize, we believe that with baptism comes the presence of the Holy Spirit. When we baptize infants or people of any age, we are marking them as a child of God. In baptism, we believe that God initiates a covenant to be our God and to make us heirs with Christ as His sons and daughters. Empowered by and led by the Holy Spirit, we share the faith with

others, just as John the Baptist did, helping others to come to know Jesus as Lord and to enter into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

The second baptism that John speaks of is the baptism of fire. The fire that John speaks of is both the fire of refining and the fire of judgment. In our daily lives, we are refined over and over as the Holy Spirit works within us to make us more and more like Jesus. The refining comes in burning off our impurities – our sins – leaving us more pure, more righteous. Daily we experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit and we repent, committing to walk a more devout life. This is part of what drove John to preach a baptism of repentance. He wanted people to be ready for the baptism that Jesus would offer.

John also knows that we will all face judgment – I think this drove the urgency that he preached with. John knew that one day the Messiah, Jesus, would return in final glory to judge the world. Offering a warning to his audience and to us today, John proclaims, *"His winnowing fork is in His hand, to clear His threshing floor and to gather the wheat into His granary; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire"*. The winnowing fork will separate the good from the bad. Like the parable of the sheep and the goats that we find in Matthew's gospel, the good, the righteous, the wheat, will be welcomed into heaven. The bad, the evildoers, the chaff, will experience eternal torment in hell. It is with this reality that we live out our faith. Like John, knowing this fact,



we should have some urgency to our efforts to help others to know Jesus. Like John, compassion and concern for those who do not know Jesus as Lord should be a big part of what drives our efforts to reach those who do not know Jesus.



Our baptism is usually the beginning of our faith journey. From that moment on we are an heir with Christ, a member of the family of God. As baptized believers, we should strive to live a life that brings honor and glory to God. While that is our goal, we do know that at times we fail to act in a manner that is pleasing to God. To illustrate what that looks like, I have two stories to share – one that illustrates success in living as God desires and one that indicates the cost of not living as God desires, of not responding to those that God places in our paths. Like our passage today, both involve water.

The first is the story of man who died in flood, leaving behind a wife and four young children. Sadly, the man was swept away by flood waters. Responding to those he saw in need, the man waded out in the rushing water, trying to help others. The rescue workers finally arrived, and they threw him a line to pull him to safety. But the man just kept passing the line to others so that they could be pulled to the shore. At last, his strength gave way and the waters swept him away. One of the rescue workers said, "He was a brave man. He could have grasped the line first, but he put everyone else ahead of himself. He repeatedly passed the life line to others". To me, this is a great example of what it means to be the ultimate servant – thinking of others much more than of ourselves.

He kept passing the lifeline to others before finally being swept away himself. He acted like Jesus, doing for others, giving life to others.

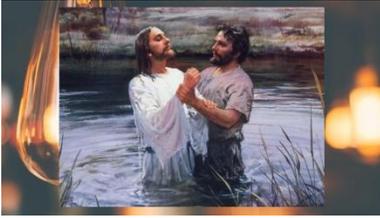
The second story is told by C.S. Lewis. He tells the story of a young lawyer who stood by watching as a young woman drowned in the Thames River. For all of his life, he was tormented by his failure to act. It drove him to the brink of suicide. One night he found himself standing on the same bridge where he had failed to act years before, and he screamed aloud, "Oh, young woman, throw yourself into the river once again, so that I may save us both". Sadly, we can all relate to the story of this young man. We have all missed or passed by opportunities to help the other in need. We have all lived with some regret over our inaction. But we do not necessarily have to remain there. We can, with God's grace, move forward and gain stronger resolve to take action when presented with the next opportunity to serve the other.

Our faith journey began when we were baptized into Christ. In baptism we become a part of the family of God. It is an outward sign of an inward commitment to live a life faithful to God. As we begin to draw to a close, I want to share the story of one famous person's baptism experience.

Paul Harvey wrote about his own baptism. He said that even though he had received almost every reward for his broadcasting ability that he still felt empty inside. One summer, however, he and his wife were vacationing in a place called Cave Creek, AZ. Sunday morning came, and they decided to go to church.

So, they went to this little church, and there were only 12 other people present. He believed in Jesus, but he had never gone forward in a church service. One night he had prayed in his hotel room and asked Jesus to come into his heart, but he felt that there was still something that was missing. He said that the preacher got up and announced that his sermon was going to be about baptism. Paul Harvey said, "I yawned. But as he started talking about it I found myself interested. He talked about the symbolism behind it, and how it symbolized the complete surrender of one's life to Jesus Christ, and how there was nothing really magic in the water. But there was this cleansing inside that took place when you yielded yourself to Jesus."

He went on to say, "Finally, when he came to the end of his sermon he said, 'If any of you have not been baptized in this way, I invite you to come forward and join me here at the pulpit.' To my surprise, I found myself going forward. The preacher had said there was nothing magic in the water. Yet as I descended into the depths and rose again I knew something life changing had happened - a cleansing inside out. No longer did there seem to be two uncertain contradictory Paul Harvey's, just one immensely happy one. I felt the fulfilling surge of the Holy Spirit in my life." Paul Harvey concluded, "The change this simple act made in my life is so immense as to be indescribable. Since totally yielding to Him in baptism, my heart can't stop singing. Also, perhaps because baptism is such a public act and because one's dignity gets as drenched as one's body, I discovered a new unself-consciousness in talking about my beliefs." Paul Harvey swam in the river of God's grace and love.



Jesus comes to John the Baptist to be baptized. Did you ever think about why did Jesus came? He was certainly without sin. Jesus did not need to repent and to be washed clean. Jesus came to be baptized because it was God's anointing of Him for ministry. Jesus was anointed to be in mission for God. When Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism, we remember that *"the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him"*. Just as with Jesus, just as with Paul Harvey, when we were baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon us too. And then God spoke over Jesus, saying, *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"*. In baptism, we are welcomed into the family of God, made fellow heirs of the promise of grace and life eternal.



The mission that Jesus came to fulfill was to be a servant, to serve others so that they could be saved. Jesus was appointed, born to be among us as One who saves and serves the world. He was one who passed the lifeline along to others and He invites us to do the same. Jesus came not as a conquering King but as one who washed feet, touched lepers, befriended sinners, and gave life to all. Christ calls us to do same. May we ever be like our Jesus, so that one day we too will hear God say to us, *"You are my son, you are my daughter, the beloved; with you I am well pleased"*. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) Jesus came not to rule but to wash feet, to befriend sinners... Where can you find opportunities to reach out to serve others like Jesus did?
- 2) Who do you know that needs to feel the fulfilling surge of the Holy Spirit in their life? Pray for God to bring them this gift.
- 3) How can you be a "lifeline" to someone in need this week?

The Way Forward – A Journey for the United Methodist Church

For the past two Sundays I have been discussing one of the major plans being brought to the Special General Conference to be held on February 23-26. At the last General Conference, in June 2016, several groups brought proposals to the floor to address the topic of homosexuality. When it became apparent that resolution would be very difficult and divisive, a proposal was made to ask the Council of Bishops to provide guidance and direction. The result of that was the formation of the "Commission on the Way Forward" and from this group, three proposals or plans or models were brought forth. In general, the Way Forward involves our global denomination and our Book of Discipline's wording, guidelines, and understanding of the topic of homosexuality. Last Sunday I shared on the "The Connectional Conference Plan" – one of the two major plans NOT recommended by the majority of the Council of Bishops. Today, I will briefly unpack the last major plan – The Traditional Plan - and share a few other details concerning things that will come to the floor in February. Next Saturday, on January 19th, we will have a "Town Hall Meeting" to further unpack and discuss these plans, the potential impacts upon the global church and upon our

church here in Winner, and to try and answer some questions. Beata Ferris, one of our two Dakotas Conference representatives to the Special General Conference, will be present to help guide our time together.

A Way Forward

CONVERSATIONS
ABOUT A WAY
FORWARD FOR THE
UNITED METHODIST
CHURCH



Traditionalist Model

Not recommended by Commission or Bishops

- ▶ Affirms current Book of Discipline language: "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching." Same-sex marriage is prohibited. Board of Ordained Ministry is prohibited from recommending non-celibate homosexual candidates for ordination.

Traditionalist Model

- ▶ Enforcement measures would be increased in effort to purge those who would disobey the current rules.

- ▶ **PRO:** This is a plan for keeping the status quo and some will prefer that option.
- ▶ **PRO:** Requires no changes to our structure.

- ▶ **CON:** This is a plan for keeping the status quo; fighting will continue and our mission will continue to be compromised with bad publicity from costly church trials.
- ▶ **CON:** Not a plan for unity and asks the progressives to leave or face costly trials.

- ▶ **CON:** It is likely that we will lose most of the millennials and next generations.

Other Considerations:

- ▶ Roughly 50 proposals are being brought that contain the details of these three plans. They will be considered one proposal at a time.
- ▶ There are approximately 50 other proposals currently being considered for the gathering.

Possible Outcomes:

- ▶ Nothing changes – legislative gridlock and/or division and hardening of positions.
- ▶ A step that feels like movement forward, with more steps needed.
- ▶ A Holy Spirit Breakthrough.

Complications/Implications:

- ▶ Some churches leave/change relationship with UMC.
- ▶ Impact on our global witness and mission.
 - ▶ “No Malaria” campaign
- ▶ A “gracious exit” plan.

From Bishop Ough:

- ▶ With many truths in Bible, we have undergone changes in our understanding of how we live into those truths. We have evolved in many cases. Is it possible that we have taken 6-8 verses and made them the crux of our theology? When we allowed this small issue to raise to the level of an article of religion, we moved away from our Wesleyan heritage.