

## **Watermarked – Our Baptismal Identity: Acceptance**

A sermon preached by

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February 25, 2018

### **Mark 8:31-38 Common English Bible (CEB)**

*Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: “The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead.” He said this plainly. But Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then sternly corrected Peter: “Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.”*

*After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in the Father’s glory with the holy angels.”*

As I said last Sunday, this Lent we are engaged in a series on our baptismal identity as Christians that I’ve called *watermarked*. During this time, we will preach, pray, sing, and study together the baptismal liturgy that forms each of us as Christians. Last Sunday and this morning in addition to the gospel lesson, I’m using the questions and affirmations that we ask of persons who are being baptized or their sponsors.

If you take the United Methodist Hymnal and turn to page 34, you can see the beginning of this liturgy. Today, I want to talk about the second question that we pose to parents who sponsor their child or to adults who come to the water on their own. It is, “Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?”

I want to talk about two key words in this question this morning. The first is *accept* – “Do you *accept* the freedom and power God gives you. . . .” It is easy to live in a world of despair, to think that you have no power, no authority – in essence no hope. But the claiming of our baptismal identity begins with the reality that there is evil in the world and pronouncement

that we have the freedom and power to address this reality if only we will accept it as a gift from God.

One of the popular new books on the market right now is *Enlightenment Now*. A couple of nights ago I watched an interview with the book's author, Steven Pinker.<sup>1</sup> Pinker's assertion is that the world is actually a much better place today than it was decades or centuries ago. He says that, "Fewer of us die of disease and starvation. Fewer of us are illiterate. Fewer of us are victims of violent crimes. Fewer of us die in wars. Fewer of us live under dictatorships."<sup>2</sup> That is a radical claim for those of us who are glued to the New York Times or Fox News and all that we hear about is that the world is falling apart. I must confess that I don't naturally gravitate toward this positive world view.

But Pinker says that this kind of pessimism is "a severe problem, (and) that people have become so cynical about our ability to deal with problems that they either withdraw from politics altogether or embrace radicalism, the calls to smash the machine, to drain the swamp, to burn the empire, to hand power to charismatic would-be dictators, as only I can fix it.

"That's appealing if you think that the incremental technocratic solutions are failing. It's only when you zoom out and look at the historical trajectory, you realize that some of these incremental measures really can work over the long run."<sup>3</sup> And they work, according to Pinker, because people in the past worried about issues like food and water safety, child labor, slavery, and hundreds of other threats to human flourishing and decency. The reason Bill Gates loves Pinker's books is that they offer a hope, a promise that you really can change the world as the Gates Foundation is seeking to do in areas of quality healthcare and great education.

So, our baptismal witness begins with this same kind of optimism, although for Christians it is based upon God's goodness. It asks, "Will you walk away from the valley of the shadow of death and accept the freedom and power God gives you?" Will you believe in the promise of hope, reconciliation, redemption, peace? Jesus' lesson to his disciples in Mark's gospel this morning is that this hopeful promise does not come from power and authority, it doesn't mean that might makes right...instead it comes from self-sacrifice, or what Jesus refers to as the cross. It isn't any wonder that Peter wants to correct him, because the idea that hope

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<sup>1</sup> *PBS News Hour*, February 22, 2018, Steven Pinker Interview by Paul Solman.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

comes from suffering and sacrifice is not what most of us have been taught to honor. Yet in the world's history, the times when we have been called and responded to a witness of sacrifice for the greater good, these are the times that have led to the flourishing of humanity. So, Jesus' rebuke of Peter is in effect that self-indulgence or a *what's in it for me* culture is a dependency on power and authority that stems from a human trait, not a Godly purpose.

But this hope is not built on an uncritical assessment of the world. Just as we *accept* this hope, so too we must *reject* these realities. That of course, the second part of this baptismal liturgy question, "(Will you) resist evil, injustice and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves." The acceptance of this promise comes at a cost, a cost that is clearly delineated in Jesus' teachings to the disciples.

*"All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them.*

When our adults and confirmands take their membership vows for this and every other United Methodist congregation they are asked a couple of questions that are supported by the vows that they took or that were taken for them when they were baptized. One of those questions is "Will you be loyal to the United Methodist Church and uphold it by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness."<sup>4</sup> As I have been fond of saying for the past 30 years, this is not a multiple-choice question. You can't do one of these things and not the other, that is not remotely what Jesus is saying. To take up your cross isn't one option among many. It is a call to prayer, but without action it fails the test of discipleship to Jesus.

In an article last year after the Las Vegas mass murder, Kirsten Powers wrote about the "thoughts and prayers" platitudes that have become the political ritual response from those who don't wish to further the cause of doing something about the gun violence that is gripping our nation. In that article she quotes Rev. Eugene F. Rivers, who says, "If we profess to follow Jesus, all of our talk must be indivisibly connected to all of our deeds. If there are no deeds, then the talk is meaningless. The contrived, empty platitudes are a public relations gimmick to avoid confronting this ideologically captive religion which bears no fruit." Later in the article she

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<sup>4</sup> United Methodist Baptismal Covenant III, United Methodist Hymnal, 1989, p.48.

quotes Miroslav Volf, who once said to her, “There is something deeply hypocritical about praying for a problem you are unwilling to solve.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, one of the justifiable raps against the church is that we often fail to put our money where our mouths are. Jesus’ own stories often talked about this disconnect between words and action, failing to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those in prison. In the story of the Good Samaritan, it isn’t the person with the right beliefs or religious pedigree who wins Jesus’ praise, instead it is the person who sees another human being robbed and left for dead by the side of the road and does *something*. Even if the priest had said, *You’ll be in my thoughts and prayers* to him as he passed him by, he’d still be a bad priest.

So, our baptismal identity is to both claim the freedom and power God gives us and to resist the places wherever we see evil and injustice. It’s not multiple choice, you can’t have one without the other, for the world is filled with those who seek to gain power, but it always comes at the cost of our souls. And the question for each of us is, “Will I take up the cross?”

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<sup>5</sup> Kirsten Powers, The Washington Post, October 3, 2017