

Watermarked: Our Baptismal Identity – Becoming
A sermon preached by
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John 12:20-36

²⁰Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

²⁷“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” ²⁹The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” ³⁰Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. ³¹Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. ³²And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” ³³He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. ³⁴The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” ³⁵Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. ³⁶While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

This morning we conclude our *Watermarked* Lenten series on baptism. I think it has been a great opportunity for us to ponder the meaning and importance of this rite of entrance into the Christian faith community. I am grateful to Bonny and Jane for their fine homiletical work the past two Sundays while I was on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. And I also appreciate the leaders and participants in the small groups that have gathered to discuss what their baptismal identity means to them and how it influences their lives.

In the United States there is an average of 2.5 baptisms per year for each of our nearly 32,000 United Methodist churches. That number, like most statistics, is deceptive because of the

vast differences in the size and average age of our congregations. A few years ago, we had over thirty baptisms in one year here at First Church. Over the last ten years we've averaged about eleven baptisms a year. But if the average is 2.5 and we've done eleven then it doesn't take an actuary to know that many of our congregations can go a year or two or three without ever witnessing and participating in a baptism in their worship services.

In John's gospel lesson this morning, the author tells the story of those who were gathering to worship at the Festival of the Passover. John says that some of them *were Greeks*, in other words not Judeans, people who might have been unfamiliar with the traditions of the temple and the people of Israel. But regardless of their faith traditions and beliefs, something had drawn them to Jerusalem during the festival. They were curious, questioning, seeking. And they went to the disciples and said, "*We want to see Jesus.*"

When I Googled that phrase earlier this week, most of what I retrieved was a shallow praise song by the same title. If you don't know it, you aren't missing much. The song goes on and on and on about seeing Jesus, but it doesn't carry any imperative to do anything. I think even the curious Greeks in John's story were thinking that encounter with Jesus would be a pretty passive occasion. And yet, Jesus is quite clear that to really see him is to encounter a life changing divine force. It is to die to self, to die to the old understandings, the old prejudices, the old assumptions about what is life-giving. When Jesus says *unless a grain of wheat dies...* it is more than an agriculture lesson. It is a lesson about the cost of discipleship and the implications that undergird our baptisms.

So, this takes me back to those church members who rarely have the opportunity to see and participate in a baptism. At the end of the baptismal liturgy, the whole congregation is commended to love and care for the children or adults who have just been baptized. The pastor doesn't put this to the church as an option, instead it is an imperative. "*Do all in your power to increase their faith, confirm their hope and perfect them in love.*"¹ In effect the liturgy is saying, "If you want to see Jesus, you have to do something!"

In this way, baptism is moved from being an individual decision, a statement of personal faith, (what is sometimes called believer baptism) to a communal action and responsibility.

¹ United Methodist Hymnal, United Methodist Publishing House, 1989, p. 43.

That is one of the reasons we freely, willingly, and eagerly baptize babies. Because the baptism isn't theirs alone. First and foremost it is God's, but it is also the parents', grandparents', and the entire community's acceptance of a gift freely given. Every time we baptize a child, this church commits to that child's love and care. That's the reason we have a safe and effective nursery. It is the reason we offer Sunday School classes, youth fellowship activities, musical ensembles, mission projects, and the whole range of what we do here. We do these things because we have pledged to *do all in our power* to make Jesus visible to our children and youth.

This search for Jesus isn't only for our children. The truth is that all of us are searching in one way or another for Jesus. Jesus himself tells us that this search will not be easy. In Matthew, he tells the story of the judgement of the nations, where the King sits in judgement of those who see -- or fail to see -- the master in the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the imprisoned, the naked, and the stranger. Throughout the Gospels, seeing Jesus revolves around our service to others, our denial of self, our looking beyond the powerful and elite.

A couple of weeks ago, our Holy Land group left the lush beauty of the Sea of Galilee and drove down the Jordan River valley toward Jericho and the wilderness. The Jordan River begins at the bottom of the Sea and weaves its way down the valley, getting ever smaller and seemingly dirtier by the mile. No one knows exactly where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, but we do know that it was somewhere in this river nearly two thousand years ago. So, enterprise being what it is the world over, baptismal sites have sprung up, up and down the river. One of the oldest sites has palm trees and lush landscaping, but we didn't stop there. Instead our bus pulled into a dusty parking lot in the middle of what appeared to be a very inhospitable, barren, lifeless wilderness landscape.

Suddenly, the story took on new meaning. The stark landscape reinforced the reality of baptism's meaning that is so often obscured by grandma's baptismal gown and the parents' joy of welcoming a new life into their midst. When we left the bus, we heard multiple languages being spoken, songs were being sung, pastors were exhorting their groups with what seemed like tales of new birth, and one group was even presenting a well-choreographed dance. As we walked down to the muddy river, people of all shapes and sizes were wearing long white gowns to provide the illusion of modesty as they waded into the same river that had touched Jesus.

Our group took a different tack. We stood off to the side and Bishop Rader and I talked about what we thought was significant about baptism. Then Sharon and I dipped our hands in

the muddy mess and asked the group to come forward as we placed the sign of the cross on their foreheads with the water. “Remember your baptism, and be thankful,” we said. It was about as ecstatic as mainline protestant, Midwestern Americans can get. In the moment, I think that some of us saw Jesus again, but as a beginning, not an end.

Our task then is to follow the commendation of the baptismal rite. To increase faith, confirm hope, and perfect love in our communities, in our world, in ourselves. In that way, others who want to see Jesus can see Jesus through us, through our very being, through our daily actions, and through the way we live our lives. There are many people around us who have given up on the church. Some of them are hurt and angry, some are disappointed or disillusioned, yet the church remains, in my view, the best chance for us to gather and point toward the Jesus of mercy, justice, love, grace, and peace.

This is who we long to see...may it be so. Amen.