

Epiphany Worship Series—“The Essentials”

11 January 2015: Baptism of the Lord Sunday (Year B)

First United Methodist Church of Arlington, TX

“Pleasing God”

Preaching Text: Mark 1:4-11

“If we displease God, does it matter whom we please?

If we please Him does it matter whom we displease?”

(Leonard Ravenhill, Why Revival Tarries: A Classic on Revival).

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Perhaps no question is as obvious and ultimately as unanswerable as this one: “Why does

Jesus need to be baptized?” May we hear the day’s lesson:

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, “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.”

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:4-11).

Pleasing God is the title of our worship series: “why we worship, learn and serve together.”

In a sense this title describes the DNA of our congregation and has for a long time. We have not surrendered to the suburbs, but have by design stayed in Downtown Arlington to worship, learn, and serve in and for our community. An example of what it means to please God comes from a 1981 feature film, *Chariots of Fire*. It is the true story of two British runners competing in the 1924 Olympics. Eric Liddell is an earnest Christian and a world class runner. Eric’s sister, Jennie, wants him to leave competitive running to join the family on the mission field in China. Jennie feels Eric is putting running ahead of serving God and Eric’s commitment.

Eric attempts to help his sister see his point of view and announces, “I’ve decided I’m going

back to China. The missionary service has accepted me.” Jennie interrupts him. “Oh, Eric, I’m so pleased.”

But Eric continues, “But I’ve got a lot of running to do first. Jennie, you’ve got to understand. I believe that God made me for a purpose, for China. He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give it up would be to hold him in contempt. You were right; it’s not just fun. To win is to honor God” (synopsis of film from 2015 PreachingToday.com).

Pleasing God is ultimately why we worship. We may come to worship because we want to hear good music or maybe overhear something educational or uplifting, perhaps. But the primary reason we worship is to please and honor God.

Maybe you remember that all the people of Jerusalem and Judea flocked to John. Could it have been because John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey? Was the message John proclaimed? Maybe it was the fire in his eyes or the power and the passion of his voice? Whatever it was, John knew how to attract attention.

One reason baptism excites our sensibilities so much is because some people associate baptism with salvation. Persons who think about baptism like this believe that baptism is a straight forward and linear transaction, like buying a computer or a dish-washer. This kind of thinking suggests that if the church baptizes a person properly, then he or she enjoys the status of salvation. That is, if the church baptizes a person in the right way with the right understanding, with the proper amount of water, by the appropriate person, in the right place, with the right words, and the person baptized has the appropriate feeling . . . then baptism saves that person.

This view of baptism, however, no matter how sincerely believed by however many people does prompt a troubling question of faith. Why does John need to baptize Jesus? Does Jesus need salvation? Jesus, as we remember from Matthew’s Gospel story, even insists on John baptizing him. Does this mean that our Savior needs to be saved? It is a troubling question. I am

not sure I can answer it suitably.

A second reason baptism excites our sensibilities is because we often associate baptism to a ritual cleansing. We understand baptism as primarily a cleansing bath. If the waters of baptism cleanse us, then God washes away our sin. When I lived in De Leon I remember some members of First Baptist Church who talked of a woman in their church. She cherished baptism so much that she had the church baptize her regularly and often. She often took advantage of her church's altar call and ambled down the aisle of the church confessing her sins. Then Brother Cecil received her confession and baptized her regularly and often. Some liked the arrangement because, as they told me, they only had to sing one or two verses of "Just as I Am" on these Sunday evenings.

The church had become a rather large "confessional booth" for this woman and she always left with a good warm feeling in her heart. Methodists only baptize a person one time because we believe that God baptizes us and we believe that God does it correctly the first time. No "do overs" are necessary. Our hymnal puts it nicely: "Baptism is not administered to any person more than once, for while our baptismal vows are less than reliable, God's promise to us in the sacrament is steadfast."

Thus, like the question about whether Jesus needed salvation or not, we can also ask, "From what is Jesus cleansed?" What exactly was Jesus' sin—that is if baptism has to do exclusively with cleansing and the repentance of sin? Later witnesses to the Christian faith write some explicit arguments about Jesus' life that directly contradicts this understanding of Jesus' baptism if we only understand baptism through the lens of repentance and cleansing. In fact, our New Testament says: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). Why does Jesus insist on baptism and why does he need it? This is a question that still persistently remains for us. Dr. Elton Brown offers a great insight from Mark 1 and writes:

The text represents a striking interplay between Jesus' authority and his humility. In these verses it is John who declares that Jesus has the authority to baptize with the Holy Spirit. In the chapters that follow, we will see Jesus act out that authority—the authority to teach, the authority to heal and cast out demons, the authority to heal.

Jesus embodies his own humility. How odd, the early Christians must have thought, that their Lord should be baptized along with penitent sinners! Mark did not know of the doctrine of the Trinity, nor was he aware of Paul's claim that all the faithful people who are baptized are baptized into Christ's own baptism. What Mark knows and proclaims is the Suffering Servant, the crucified Messiah.

Jesus' authority and Jesus' humility are not two different things held together, even paradoxically. Jesus' authority is the authority of the humble one, and his humility is the (true) humility of the one to whom all authority belongs (*Feasting on the Word – Year B*).

Thus the exchange between John and Jesus makes Jesus not only willing but insistent on putting himself under authority. Demanding that John Baptize him puts Jesus under the authority of God and this is why I think that Jesus requires John to baptize him. Jesus, full of humanity and divinity, in effect says to those who witness his baptism—and this includes John—"if baptism is good enough for you, then baptism is good enough for me." Not only this, but by example Jesus also suggests: "If baptism is good enough for me, then baptism is good enough for you also."

Jesus' humanity emphasizes his divinity and his divinity emphasizes his humanity. I think this is the reason that Jesus insists that John baptize him in the Jordan River. Baptism specifically puts us under God's authority—and this action pleases God. It reminds all of us who confess Christ that we cannot do this business of life by ourselves. Whether or not we think God needs to save us over and over, or that no one can save us but ourselves, these attitudes are the flip sides of the same coin. We think we can be saved our way and not God's way. Baptism is God's work. Baptism is not our work. Baptism is what God does to us and for us and through us to make us God's own people.

If baptism is God's work, then our work begins after baptism. Our response to what



God has done for us through baptism is our gift back to God. To respond to God's call is to be a minister of God's grace. There are many ways to serve, but some of them are only ways that you as a unique child of God can serve by answering your call. Too often we think that ministry is for the ordained, but think how powerful the church of Jesus Christ becomes when believers accept the challenge to witness their faith. You may be able to paint houses, visit the infirmed, help stamp and stuff mailings, provide refreshments to children, sing in the choir, do liturgical dance, be camp counselor, etc., etc., etc.. The way you serve is your unique response to God's baptism of you.

Baptism and its ritual remind us of the order and source of our lives. We please God, as Eric Liddell notes his running pleases God, so too does our worship and adoration of God please God as well. Our response in ministry is also a way we embrace God's love for us by showing that love to other people. Your witness to God's love is your confession of faith. It may be difficult to imagine a confession of faith while singing a hymn or holding a paintbrush, but in God's Realm it represents our receiving of God acceptance of us. Jesus put himself under God's authority so that he could fulfill all righteousness. If Jesus embraced his baptism, then it is a good recommendation for as well!

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