

## Business as Usual?

---

**Lynette Sparks**

**Third Presbyterian Church**

**January 8, 2017 (Baptism of the Lord)**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

At first glance, it could have been just another day, just another baptism, as if baptism in and of itself were just an ordinary thing. People from all over made their way to the Jordan River to repent of their sins and be baptized by John. Even religious leaders deemed hypocritical lined up to submit to this ritual of immersion in the water, and repent.

Repent. We all know it's hard enough to simply apologize, let alone repent. Exhibit A: the half-hearted apology of a child at mom's urging – "sorry." Or the non-apology apology of an adult – "I'm sorry if you took offense." Or the classic "Mistakes were made." Did you know there's even a Wikipedia entry for "non-apology apology"? If we had a dollar for every non-apology apology issued publicly over the past year, we wouldn't have a budget care in the world!

It is hard to apologize, let alone to truly repent, for that often goes against our baser instincts. And when I say "repent" I mean not just to express remorse, but to repent in the fullest Scriptural sense: to turn away from the wrong we perpetuate and turn toward and submit to God's will.

It's reflected in one of the traditional questions for Christian baptism: *Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?*

To renounce evil and its power... If that kind of repentance was what all those people were doing that day when John baptized them, that in and of itself would, if not turn the world upside down, at least tilt it at a pretty good angle.

But then... of all people... Jesus showed up to take *his* place in line with every other sinner who needed to repent. When that happened, when God's Son himself joined the line, the angle of that tilt suddenly got a lot steeper.

It even startled John the Baptist, who doesn't seem to me like a guy who would be easily shocked. But Jesus said he needed to do this, in order to fulfil all righteousness. Matthew uses this term to refer to one's ethical response to God – a response of obedience.

In this season of unrest in our nation's life over justice for the immigrant, the refugee, those who are poor and most vulnerable; where human rights are at risk, where social media tirades pit

people of faith against one another, where school children taunt one another with racist rants they hear from the adults in their lives...in this season, the traditional baptismal question of turning from sin and renouncing evil and its power burns like a bed of white-hot coals. What will our ethical response be?

I am grateful for the powerful words of witness from nonpartisan, ecumenical organizations like Repairers of the Breach, who take that traditional baptismal question seriously. In their *Higher Ground Moral Declaration*, they declare that “the deepest public concerns of our faith traditions are how our society treats the poor, those on the margins, the least of these, women, children, workers, immigrants and the sick; equality and representation under the law; and the desire for peace, love and harmony within and among nations.”

And they remind us of Martin Luther King Jr.’s declaration that silence on these issues is betrayal. They state that “It is time to move beyond left and right, liberal and conservative, and uphold higher ground moral values.” They are using this declaration to speak with a united voice across multi-faith lines to all who hold office and shape the policy that impacts the common good.

I urge you to check it out – Google Higher Ground Moral Declaration, read it, let it do its work on you, and if you are so led, sign it. I did.

Or follow the good work of our own Presbyterian Office of Public Witness in Washington, DC, which reminds us that Jesus often “witnessed to the priority of the poor in the reign of God.”

If we do some of that, it is one way to respond to the traditional baptismal question. Even so, it still burns: *Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?*

The truth is that sometimes the evil and injustice are right in front of us, and because of our societal privilege as predominantly white and middle class people we can’t even see that. We’re oblivious to the fraught reality of a young, black male’s day to day life. Even with the best of intentions, we’re often – I’m often - pretty clueless.

But we have the witness of those who have courageously shared their experiences as persons of color, with all of the perils and promises, in both spoken and written word.

So I do hope you will join us over the next three Thursday evenings to reflect on Ta-Nehisi Coates’ book, *Between the World and Me*. I hope we’ll deepen our engagement with and understanding of racial injustice. May we let that study together also begin to do its work on us.

It could be yet another small way to respond to the traditional baptismal question that continues to burn: *Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?*

I recently had a conversation with my predecessor, Pastor Emeritus Rod Frohman. (I don’t see him in the congregation,

which is probably a good thing). I'm really grateful for Rod – for his long and faithful service here at Third Church, and for the strong outreach organization he played such a key part in developing and leading, and left to the office I now occupy. I'm grateful for his good humor. I'm grateful for his personal friendship. And I'm grateful for his supportive words and presence to me.

We met for coffee one day before Christmas, as we occasionally do. I had posted a simple, three-word entry on Facebook, which simply said, “Words fail me.” It obviously piqued Rod's curiosity, because within the hour he reached out to me with the invitation to meet. And anyone who knows Rod knows those conversations will be wide-ranging, lively, provocative, and will eventually come around to the big social justice issues of the day.

We talked for a long time about the hopes and frustrations of our present context. And I recall saying that the one thing I hoped was that the Church – both Third Church in particular and the larger Church in general – would not remain in the mode of business as usual, but find new courage to respond with boldness and hope.

For even as the work we presently do to help feed, house and care for people is a direct renunciation of evil and power in this world, our context is continually changing, and needs are changing. As the Word of God is living and active, God's call to the Church is living and active.

So in response, I hope we the Church will double down on our attention to the evil of injustice, beginning with exposing our own blind spots as a starting point. And when our eyes are opened to how they connect with laws and policies, let's become informed so that we can collectively speak with the voice of faith against injustice and in support of just and fair solutions. For baptism is God's claim on us as beloved children, trusting in God's mercy, turning from the ways of sin, renouncing every kind of evil and its power in the world, *and* turning to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

The presence of Jesus in this world is God's direct refutation of the power of sin and evil. What could be a greater renunciation of that power than when God tore open the heavens at Jesus' baptism and proclaimed for all the world in every time and place to hear, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Nothing about that declaration is business as usual. Today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah says of the Servant of the Lord, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” Jill Duffield writes, “The gentleness described in these few words reveals the character of our God with a certainty and specificity that run counter to the prevailing attitudes and actions of humanity... A bruised reed the servant Savior will not break. A dimly burning wick the Lord's chosen will protect and fan, not extinguish or smother... God's

chosen servant is gentle, relentlessly pursuing justice, unwilling to use efficiency as an excuse for promoting the survival of the fittest.”

And then Duffield connects the Isaiah text with Matthew’s text on Jesus’ baptism, as she imagines Jesus standing on the side of the river with sinners. “The bruised reeds and dim wicks have the Beloved Son on their side. Sinners have a shot at salvation. The Son who submits to baptism will also submit to death, coming up from the water and the grave for the sake of the unclean, the underdogs, Gentiles, prisoners, Pharisees, soldiers, Pilate, Peter, all of God’s fallen, yet beloved world.”

If that is not the most divinely, wildly imaginative renunciation of evil, I don’t know what is.

Noted in-house theologian Becky D’Angelo-Veitch said so well in her children’s sermon that we are better together. In Jesus’ baptism, Robert Saler notes the start of a pattern in Jesus’ ministry to continually empower the church for service rather than limit that power to himself. Instead of consolidating his power to heal the world, “Jesus intends to share with the church, and to multiplying effect.”

I guess we’re not off the hook. It seems Jesus would rather that we not stand idly by. We *are* better together. And the good news is that in these days of national uncertainty and anxiety, our baptismal mandate is neither partisanship nor is it paralysis. Our mandate is nothing less than the life and words of Jesus, who said:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’*

May we trust in God’s gracious, merciful, and even audacious claim of us in baptism, to offer our faithful response.

Amen.