

The Third Church Pulpit
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Dividing Lines

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Baptism of the Lord

Acts 8:14-18

In the days of the early church during the first century, when Peter and John left Jerusalem to visit the newly forming church in Samaria, big shifts had already occurred. Jerusalem had been the epicenter of the church, birthed when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. It was the mothership. But eventually rounds and rounds of persecution of Greek-speaking believers at that time took their toll. Stephen was martyred. Saul dragged members of the early church off to prison.

And in that fearful context, the church began to disperse. Except for the twelve apostles, everyone else in the Jerusalem church scattered to the countryside of Judea, and then beyond to Samaria. But that didn't stop the church's existence; and it certainly didn't stop its witness to God's saving power through Jesus the Messiah. The church moved out just as Jesus had instructed it to, carrying with it the good news to Judea, and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. Wherever the early church members went, they spoke and lived their message. And, Acts says, the Word took hold.

It took hold even among the Samaritans. Yes, the Samaritans - the ones who were historically rivals because even though they worshiped the same God, according to those in Jerusalem, they worshiped at the wrong temple on the wrong mountain. They were, as one commentator described, “deficient in their practices and beliefs.” The parable of the Good Samaritan was surprising to Jesus' disciples because Samaritans weren't considered “good.” And the story of Jesus speaking with the woman at the well was shocking in part because she was from Samaria.

So, it seems to me that for those in Samaria to receive the good news coming out of Jerusalem without any skepticism, but instead with joy, would be like Bills fans believing the word of the Patriots. Or Mac users converting to PCs, iPhone devotees switching to Android.

Or even Rochester's east siders defecting to the west side.

In the earlier part of Acts Chapter 8 that we did not read this morning, we learn that Philip was one of those who brought the message of the early church. And in response to what he proclaimed, and the deeds he performed, the good news of Jesus as Messiah took hold in an entirely new place. It took hold among people like the notorious magician Simon. It took hold among historic rivals, erasing old enemy lines, and leading scores of new followers to be baptized.

It took hold enough for word about what was happening in Samaria to get back to the apostles back in Jerusalem. Could it be true? Would God actually cross those historic divisions, and color outside the lines that had been so carefully drawn? Peter and John had to come and see what all the fuss was about.

Now, all of this makes me wonder what posture Philip took when he went to Samaria in the first place. As he shared the good news and baptized new followers, I wonder how he approached its people. Sometimes Scripture is sparse on these details, maddeningly so, and we're left to wonder what kind of connections he made with them, what kind of rapport he established. Did he do his homework ahead of time? Were there different cultural norms that he needed to be aware of? Or social conventions he had to brush up on?

If you have done any traveling in different parts of the world, or even different parts of this country, for that matter, you know you're well-advised to make sure you don't do something foolish, or offensive. Before Brad and I and our kids went to live in Southeast Asia, we learned a number of important things in order to navigate that culture. We learned not to pat a child on his or her head - not good manners. Never point with your index finger; only point with your whole hand. If you're handing money to a clerk in a store, or a business card to a colleague, never give it with only one hand; always present it with two hands. And don't just stick that business card you just received into your pocket; make sure you scan it with intention, and show you're paying attention to it. It was important that we become culturally competent in order to build the relationships needed for our new life there.

The Third Church Kenya travel team that plans to visit our partner Kihumo congregation this fall is beginning to ask those kinds of questions. And if you had a chance to listen to Lou Loggi at last week's Sunday Seminar, you might have heard how members of our RAIHN team go through training to learn how best to be in ministry to the families without homes - what's helpful to say, what's not; what are good questions, and what are inappropriate and intrusive?

We're going to ask those questions with our intergenerational team that's traveling to the Gulf coast in Southeast Texas next month, to help with long-term hurricane recovery. How can we prepare ourselves to be open and responsive to those who've suffered devastating losses of homes or businesses?

We ask those questions as we do ministry in our own city. What does it take to become culturally competent here, in Rochester, where racial and class and cultural differences are as stark as ever. It needs to be more than a buzzword. We have critical work to do in order to first understand ourselves and how our own biases, our own worldviews and assumptions might differ from others, and even cause harm if we're not attuned to them. We need to understand how others experiences of trauma, of segregation, of inequality shape who they are.

It matters from an ethical and humanitarian perspective. And for Christians, it matters from a faith perspective. It's part of what our baptism calls us to do, just as in baptism, the Holy Spirit brings us together. Daniel Migliore says that baptism is a sacrament of solidarity: the sacrament of God's solidarity with the world, the sacrament of human solidarity in Christ with each other, and the sacrament of human solidarity with the whole groaning creation.

You see, the Spirit's work in baptism always moves to break down barriers, to erase the dividing lines that are etched in permanent ink. The Spirit's work in baptism always moves to bring us together, to create new community where before, there were strangers and enemies, or at the very least, people who are suspicious or skeptical of one another.

In these days of intractable division at a national level, especially in our politics, I wish we knew what that that meant. I wish we knew what would change it once for all (besides, of course, getting everyone to agree with me!).

But we do know what it means in our daily individual lives - breaking out of cliques at school. Befriending people outside of our social or professional class. Staying in touch with that family member who sees the world oh so differently than we do. If we're white, building more genuine relationships with people of color. In a city as segregated as ours is, we have to work harder at that.

And in church life, in the 21st century, Israel Kamudzandu suggests this text invites us to think cross-culturally. I'm really grateful to Melanie Jones, Third Church's Arts & Enrichment director, for her leadership to bring opportunities and volunteers to underserved children that live at Wilson Commencement Park. Whether in the after-school program, or the Summer Sizzle program, she is bringing people and enrichment activities that connect with the native

cultures of the children, so that they can understand and learn from the experience more readily.

It's a perspective I hope we can increasingly take as the Spirit leads. In an article published just a couple of days ago in the Religion News Service, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson pointed out shifts that are happening in Christianity. The world is becoming more religious, not less, but that growth is happening in Africa and the Global South. Western expressions of Christianity that have been shaped by post-Enlightenment European culture, are on the decline. Where growth is happening among American Christians, it's happening among non-whites....Future expressions of Christian faith will be shaped by its interactions with non-Western and nonwhite cultures," which will present challenges.

Now, those are generalities, of course. Who knows how those trends will play out here, where we are? And yet, our baptismal call implores us to pay attention, to adopt a posture of solidarity and relationship even as we cross the boundaries of who and what we know to who and what we don't know, whether it is across racial and economic divides, or religious divides. or even the digital divide.

And we don't do it alone. Just as the Holy Spirit animated the lives of those baptized into the early church when Peter and John lay their hands on them, so the Spirit does for us. In the words of Migliore, the Spirit spans the gap between the then and there and the here and now. In the days of the early church, God's good news could not be contained, and the work of the Spirit could not be quenched. Despite the religious oppression of the day, despite the scattering of the church, it took hold and spread through the faithfulness of God's people and through the sacrament of God's solidarity with the world.

So with the confidence that God will do again what God has done before, like the early church let us embrace the call to bear witness to the radically inclusive love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

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