

WHEN ALL THE PEOPLE ARE BAPTIZED
LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22

On this particular Sunday, the Spirit calls us to remember baptism: the Lord's baptism, our baptism and the baptisms of each and every Beloved whom God has gathered here. Remembering the Lord's baptism provides the occasion to reaffirm our baptismal covenant and to celebrate God's call to Jamie Campbell-Naidoo, Pat Dunbar, Lena Prewitt, Annabel Stephens and Rachel Walker in this particular place at this particular time. Each of them has a story to tell, and they have told them to the session, who agree with the congregation that the Spirit is calling Jamie to be ordained as an elder in the church of Jesus Christ and Rachel to be ordained as a deacon in this body. Pat, Lena and Annabel already have kneeled where Jamie and Rachel will kneel, and so what we, as the body of Christ, are doing this morning is reaffirming and celebrating God's call to them.

What God has joined together, let no man or woman put asunder. Oh, wait. This language belongs to another liturgy. Or not (depending on who presides at the service). The point is that the call to ordination is just as deep-seated as the covenant marriage. Being ordained is part of who you are and the experience stays with you forever (even if one ceases to be an elder or deacon, a process that, by the way, is almost as complicated as a divorce).

There is something sacramental about being ordained. Please note that the language that I am using is "sacramental" rather than "sacrament." The tradition to which we belong recognizes only two sacraments---baptism and the Lord's Supper---and because ordination to a particular office happens only once in one's life, the act of ordination has more in common with baptism than the Lord's Supper. Baptism is the sacrament celebrated once in one's life. A person is baptized only once (but, of course, we, as a congregation, celebrate each and every baptism that happens in our midst). The sacrament of the Lord's Supper is one that is celebrated again and again (Sunday after Sunday here at UPC).

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Baptism of the Lord, Year C, January 10, 2010

Confession: I feel that it is appropriate to ordain and install elders and deacons on the Sunday on which the church remembers the Baptism of the Lord. In fact, the practice excites me. For Christ's baptism marks the beginning of a ministry that passes through one wilderness after another, and the call to ordination or return to active service functions as an invitation to go through one wilderness after another, as the Spirit leads.

Remembering Christ's baptism offers comfort to those intimidated by the gravity of the calling, reminding them---and reminding us---that the center of the body to which we are called is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the head of the church. In remembering his baptism, we remember ours. We remember that there is only one baptism and that each and every one of us, ordained or not, belong to Christ's body and are called to be servants of one who hungers and thirsts for justice and for whom death is merely a valley through which we pass.

The story of our Lord's baptism is told in Gospel after Gospel with each one offering a particular twist on the story. For Ernest Hess, who serves as pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, one of Luke's specific contributions is to frame Christ's baptism in terms of expectation and questioning. Notice how the Lectionary reading begins: "As the people were filled with expectation...all were questioning in their hearts."

When I revisited this text in preparation for this sermon, my first thought was, "I wonder how many sermons called 'Great Expectations' will be written between now and Sunday." Truth be told, I briefly considered writing one myself, but my disdain for cliché led me to another place for this time.

The observation that "all were filled with expectation...and...questioning their hearts" is almost as compelling as the notion of all people being baptized, Jesus praying, the heavens being opened and a dove descending on the Beloved.

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The church places great expectations on those called to ordination. For example, *The Book of Order* says that, “Elders should be persons of faith, dedication and good judgment. Their manner of life should be a demonstration of the Christian gospel, both within the church and in the world...Together with the pastor, they should encourage people in their worship and service of God, equip and renew them for their tasks within the church and for their mission in the world, visit and comfort and care for the people, with special attention to the poor, the sick, the lonely and those who are oppressed” (G-6.0303-4).

The expectations of those ordained as deacons are just as high. *The Book of Order* explains that, “The office of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness and service after the example of Jesus Christ. Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, of exemplary lives, brotherly and sisterly love, sincere compassion and sound judgment should be chosen for this office. It is the duty of the deacons...to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress both within and beyond the community of faith” (G-6.0401-2). It is enough to make one swallow hard when a member of the Nominating Committee calls.

A pattern that I have noticed when listening to call stories is that often the person who is called to be ordained is reluctant to say, “Yes,” at first. Questions have to be answered. Expectations have to be made clear. Then, and only then, do they discern God’s call to them, and every time that God calls one of us, others will notice and affirm this call. The only question at this point is which comes first: the inner sense or the outer confirmation of this calling. In the PC(USA), both are necessary because of our belief that God works through the body and not through any one of us exclusively.

Bruce Reyes-Chow, the current moderator of the PC(USA) says this about leadership: When you think that you are leading, stop every so often and turn around. If somebody is following, then you are, in fact, a leader. This is a paraphrase of remarks that he made at a Montreat Youth Conference years

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ago that he has repeated again and again since becoming moderator at the 2008 General Assembly in San Jose.

If we spend more time looking back than looking ahead, we also cease to be leaders, because the leader who spends too much time looking back to find out who is following becomes a follower of the following. When this happens, the body suffers a crisis of leadership not unlike the one in Luke's Gospel.

The people filled with expectation are not sure if they should be following Jesus or John, and Luke is doing his best to help John step aside. John understands this and is willing to help, as he explains to the his following, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more worthy than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals...His winnowing fork is...to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary."

Would you rather be baptized by water or fire? Almost everybody here has been baptized by water (and if you have not been baptized and think that you would like to be, I assure you that we would use water, not fire, regardless of how cold it is outside). Baptism brings us together by reminding us that we are human and that we are redeemed by God's willingness to become flesh and dwell among us in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Even Christ was baptized, and he was baptized after everybody else there was. He does not have to be baptized for the forgiveness of his sin. He is baptized so that he may dwell more fully in a world that is corrupt and corrupting, and as soon as he does, he prays. He prays, and the Spirit comes. In Luke's Gospel, the Spirit comes in the form of a dove. In this service of ordination and installation, Annabel, Jamie, Lena, Pat and Rachel will be anointed with oil, which is a sign of the Spirit's presence among us. In both experiences, I pray that each and every one of you will hear what the Spirit says to Christ's body: "You are my Son (or Daughter), the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

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Pleased? With Annabel, Jamie, Lena, Pat and Rachel maybe. But with me? Yes. You. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is this: Each and every one of us is God's creation. Each and every one of us may be baptized. By virtue of this baptism, each and every one of us is called to ministry. The only question is, "Which form will this ministry take?" God calls men and women to all ministries of the church. God may call you, like God has called Annabel, Jamie and Lena, to serve as an elder. God may call you, like God has called Pat and Rachel, to serve as a deacon. Remember that God is the one who calls, and God calls the church to discern God's calling. Remember your baptism and be thankful. Remember, give thanks and sing. To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal; glory in union with Christ be the power forever! Amen.

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