

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 13, 2019

“Humility, Not False Modesty.”

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Acts 8:9-25

Today’s story from Luke’s Gospel is about baptism. It is the baptism of our Lord. We return to it year after year, so we won’t forget. Because it partially defines what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Everyone of us who is a member of this church has been baptized. It is the one required rite of every Christian congregation.

Our Lord was baptized by John in the wilderness. In doing so, Christ set a precedent for every person who would follow him. We were baptized because Jesus was baptized. Being baptized doesn’t mean we are perfect. Being baptized doesn’t mean we’ve got our life all together. Being baptized doesn’t mean we have our theology all worked out. Being baptized simply means that we acknowledge Jesus Christ s our Savior and Lord, and we have committed ourselves to walk in his footsteps as God grants us his grace. It also means that we bear Christ’s name.

Some of you may remember the story about a backpack told by our District Superintendent Margaret Gillikin. She mentioned that she had a backpack that bore her name, therefore, it was hers. At our baptism, Christ writes his name in to our hearts, therefore, we belong to Christ.

The story of Jesus’ baptism is recorded in all four gospels. Luke’s version of the account is more condensed than in the other gospels. He begins with a brief description of John the Baptist’s ministry. Luke tells us “the people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.” John answered them like this, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

Luke tells about Jesus’ baptism a few verses later. He writes simply, “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as [Jesus] was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”

Wow! Wouldn’t you love to have been there that day? I’m glad that people who were there thought to record the day for our benefit.

This event of Christ’s baptism reminds us of Christ’s humility. Christ humbled himself and was baptized by a mere mortal on our behalf. Whereas you and I would be tempted to enjoy the perks of our relationship with God, Christ humbled himself and became a servant.

St. Francis of Assisi had that kind of humility. St. Francis wanted to be as much like Christ as possible.

In a story known as the Legend of Perugia, there is a very revealing example of Francis’ humility. Hidden in a description of Francis’ practice of traveling and preaching in churches is this sentence concerning Francis: “He brought along a broom to clean the churches.” (Not sure what kind of debris he swept out). There is much written about servant leadership, and there is no better example than Francis of Assisi. Francis was simple seeking to emulate his Lord.

F. B. Meyer used an analogy for this kind of leadership: “I used to think that God’s gifts were on shelves one above the other; and that the taller we grew in Christian character, the easier we could reach them. I now find that God’s gifts are on shelves one beneath the other. It is not a question of growing taller but of stooping lower; that we have to go down, before we can go up.”

Humility, in a biblical sense, is not to be confused with false modesty. It is not allowing yourself to be walked upon because you lack the courage to stand up for yourself. Jesus was not like that at all. Jesus’ humility was an act of courageous obedience to the will of God. He was baptized not because he was a sinful person, not because he was swayed by John’s preaching, not because he was a sinner. Indeed, the Bible teaches us that he knew no sin. He was baptized because of his obedience to his Father. He did it to set a pattern for us. For you see, what God desires from us more than anything else is that we might be obedient, too. That’s what humility is all about.

God created you and me to do amazing things. But we will never be all God created us to be until we humble ourselves and become obedient to the vision God has for our lives. Christ’s baptism is important. It shows his humility, his willingness to submit to his Father’s authority.

It is surely no accident that the story of Jesus’ baptism is one of the few occasions in scripture where all three persons in the Trinity are mentioned—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now, that may not get you all excited. After all, the word Trinity doesn’t even appear in the Bible. The idea of the Trinity—that God comes to us in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—wasn’t formulated by the church until a few hundred years after Christ’s resurrection. And yet, here at Christ’s baptism, all three persons were present. The Holy

Spirit descends on Jesus (the Son) in bodily form like a dove and then the Father (God) expresses his love and his approval for Jesus, his Son.

This may seem boring, but it is important. The doctrine of the Trinity cemented the idea in the mind of Christians that when we look at Jesus, we are looking at an accurate picture of the character of God. Jesus, while remaining a human being, in all ways is a mirror image of God.

When people ask us what God is like, all we have to do is point them to Jesus. God is like this carpenter from Nazareth, we testify. God is loving, forgiving, accepting in the same way that Jesus was loving, forgiving, accepting. If you want to know what God is like, look to Jesus.

Regardless what baptism meant to Christ, it is certainly true for his followers that it is at our baptism that we receive our identity. In some traditions, a person receives his or her Christian name at baptism. While we do not receive our name at our baptism, we most certainly receive our identity. Baptism tells us we are children of God and the way we honor that baptism is to live in obedience to the will of God as best as we are able to understand it. Our words and our actions should reflect that truth. Just as Christ humbled himself in obedience to the will of God, so shall we humble ourselves to live in obedience to God's will that in all things people may see our good works and give thanks to the Father. This is why each year during Epiphany we revisit the event of Christ's baptism. We see here Christ's humility and his divinity. And we are reminded of who we are. We are his body at work in the world today, reminding the world that it is loved. We are children of God, and that is how we are called to live. Amen.