

Jesus and Paul on Baptism
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Readings: Romans 6:1-11
Matthew 16:13-20

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Romans 6:1-11

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not

prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus demanded. **“You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God.”** Peter confessed. This is one the great dramatic, defining moments in the gospels. The scene of Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi is also a large window, which opens to our view the developing faith of first generation Christianity. On a personal note, this text is also one I have lived with throughout my ministry, as it is the text from which I preached when I was examined by the presbytery for ordination (I am not preaching that sermon to you today☺).

The scene is presented as a story from the life of Jesus. But a careful reading of the text suggests that it is more likely a *POST RESURRECTION STORY* which the evangelist inserted back into the historical life of Jesus. The clues for this assessment are several: **Peter’s confession** that Jesus is the *Messiah*, to use the Hebrew word, or the *Christ*, to use the Greek word, was the **basic confession of the first Christians** – this is the only example of a contemporary of Jesus proclaiming him to be the Messiah-Christ. *Jesus is the Christ* was the unique and faith-changing confession of those who had seen the risen Jesus. There is also the **use by Jesus of the word “church”**. The word “church” occurs in only two passages in the gospels – both in Matthew. The first is when Jesus tells Peter that **“upon this rock I will build my church”**. The other is in words of injunction

about how disputes are to be resolved within the church. Both instances are misplaced - the church did not come into being until AFTER the resurrection. In sum, instead of a story taken from Jesus' life, what we have in the famous scene at Caesarea Philippi is an expression of the FAITH of the early church: Jesus is and always has been the Christ, the son of the living God for those who believe in him.

So, a story which appears to be about the faith of the disciples BEFORE the death and resurrection of Jesus turns out to be a story about the faith of the church which was born AFTER Jesus' death and resurrection. A story heavily influenced by the preaching of PAUL, the champion of the church who preached the good news that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God.

In the first generations of Christians, Paul was the primary shaper of the Christian tradition. His preaching, his teaching, the churches he founded, the letters he wrote – all worked together to transform the faith experiences of a handful of Palestinian Jews into a religion which conquered the Roman Empire and culture. For such an achievement, you would think that Paul would be widely praised as the “2nd founder of Christianity” (FCC Bauer). Instead, today Paul is more likely to be REVILED than praised. The current wave of scholarship is fascinated with the possibility of recreating the teachings of the historical Jesus, and finds the Christianity preached by Paul 30 years later to be a perversion of the simple faith taught by Jesus. Women have long been distrustful of Paul because of his statements about women “being silent in church”. More recently, those of

us who advocate greater acceptance and freedom for homosexuals in the church struggle with Paul because of his brief but pointed condemnation of homosexuality. In this revisionist age, Paul is viewed as the one who MISDIRECTED CHRISTIANITY by his ideas, rather than as one who faithfully gave shape to the ideas and faith of Jesus.

If it was a matter of simply separating the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Paul, and then clinging to the teachings of Jesus, we would have no problem: the teachings of Jesus and Paul can be distinguished. But the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Paul *about* Jesus are intertwined, tightly woven in the fabric of Christian faith. Paul and Jesus complement one another, and the teachings of each are essential to our faith today.

One place to view this interplay between the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of Paul is **BAPTISM**.

The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king's foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done, and begged the king's forgiveness. Why did you suffer this pain in silence, the Saint wanted to know. The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual."

When it comes to the ritual of the sacrament of baptism, I suspect we are much better informed than Aengus. But what do we know about the deeper meaning of Baptism?

The practice of baptism, of course, did not originate with Jesus. But his submission to baptism at the hand of his cousin and fellow prophet John the Baptist set the model for all who follow him to be baptized as well. Remember, Jesus did not baptize anyone. Paul did, but he baptized followers *of Jesus* and he baptized *in the name of Jesus*. From the very beginning of the church Christians have been baptized in the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”, and since at least the end of the 2nd century, Christians have been baptized with the creed we call the Apostles’ Creed. But what does baptism signify?

For both Jesus and Paul, baptism is about REPENTANCE, turning *away* from an inferior, sinful way of life, and turning *to* a life lived in obedience to God. Jesus, like John the Baptist, preached repentance in anticipation of the *coming rule* of God on earth. For Paul, and for all who have come after him, baptismal repentance is the **response** of faith that leads to a life of faith in the man of God *who has already come*.

At his baptism, Jesus staked his life on the **PROMISE** of what God was about to do: Jesus anticipated the coming of a time when men and women would have a fresh, new relationship with God. For Paul, baptism is a sign of what God

has *ALREADY done* for us in Jesus Christ. And what has God done? In Jesus, the Christ, the son of the living God, God extends to us a manner of life worth living forever.

“Is Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior?” That is the first question posed to one being baptized or a parent presenting a child for baptism. Or, to use that question posed to Peter, **“Who do you say Jesus is?”** For all the joy of baptism, the sacrament of baptism is not about beautiful babies and proud parents and grateful grandparents. Baptism is a call to *decide who and what* is of first importance in your life. Baptism is a time to *declare who and what* is of first importance in your life. And frankly, if you don’t know who and what is of first importance in your life – and if you are not prepared to ACT on that conviction, baptism is not for you or your children. As it was for Jesus so long ago, baptism is still a call to take your stand and submit to God and God’s rule.

Baptism is also a sign of God’s grace already at work in our lives, cementing us to God through Jesus the Christ – even when we cannot see or do not acknowledge God in our lives. The traditional baptismal liturgy of the French Reformed Church puts it so well. After the pastor has administered the water on the forehead of an infant, he addresses the child and says, **“Little child, for you Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered. For you he entered into the shadows of Gethsemane and the terror of Calvary; for you he uttered the cry ‘it is finished.’ For you he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, and there for you he intercedes. For you, even though you do not yet know it, little**

child, but in this way the Word of the Gospel is made true, 'We love him because he first loved us.'" This is the great promise of baptism: before we even know God's name, God is working through us. No matter where we are, no matter what we do. God's grace is working in us to bring us to life and to faith.

Biblical scholar Marcus Borg has said, "Images of Jesus matter...there is a strong connection between images of *Jesus* and images of the *Christian life*. Our image of Jesus affects our perception of the Christian life; and it can make Christianity credible or incredible."

So also our image and understanding of baptism matter, for our images of baptism give rise to the Christian life. If we imagine baptism as merely a rite of passage, or even as simply God's declaration of acceptance, independent of our acceptance of that grace, then baptism gives rise to a casual, superficial Christian life. But if we view baptism as Jesus and Paul did, as a powerful sign of God's work in our lives and our work in God's life, then the sacrament of baptism gives rise to a life worthy of Paul or Jesus, a life of love, a life of obedience to God, a life lived in anticipation of God's rule in every human life.

I studied piano as a child, the student of Herman Schweimann, who had been a student of a man named Frederick Morley, who had been a student of the great pianist of the first half of the 20th century, Paderewski. There is a story about

Paderewski, perhaps apocryphal, that gives us another image of the meaning of the baptism of Jesus and Paul:

A mother wanted to encourage the progress of her young son at the piano and so she bought two tickets to a Paderewski performance. When the night arrived she found their seats near the front of the concert hall and they eyed the large grand piano parked by itself on the stage. Soon the mother found a friend to talk with and she did not notice the boy slip away. Only when the house lights dimmed, the spotlights came on, and the piano was bathed in light, did this mother notice that her son was seated at the piano bench, where he began innocently to plunk the keys in a rendition of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. The audience roared, his mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, Paderewski himself appeared and moved quickly towards the keyboard. "No, don't quit, keep on playing," he whispered to the boy. And reaching past him with his left hand the Master began improvising a bass part, and then with his right hand, he reached around on the other side of the boy to add a running obbligato. The crowd was spell bound and the piece concluded in thunderous applause as the boy announced, "*I didn't know I could do that.*"

The underlying promise of baptism is that by the grace of God, we indeed CAN do that. We can reach for God. We can lead a life patterned after the life of Jesus. We can be faithful to our baptismal vows. We can do it, because we are not playing alone. AMEN.