

Nineteenth after Pentecost - Baptismal Sunday

October 19, 2014

Barrhaven United Church

Exodus 33:12-23
Matthew 22: 15-22

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Belonging Together

This morning we celebrate the sacrament of Andrew's baptism. Doing that - baptizing the newest member of God's family calls us to think about what sacrament and baptism mean, what our own baptism means and what it means to belong to a community of faith.

Sacraments are acts that both point toward and make present the sacred dimension of life. Sacrament means signs pertaining to things divine. It means visible forms of an invisible grace. And the forms of grace are also the channels of grace. A sacrament then is both the sign of the divine and it participates in it- it is the channel by which that event occurs. A sacrament both participates in and helps create what it points to. Let me say that again. A sacrament is both a sign of something transcendent and also participates in that transcendent event.

Baptism is the sacrament that both marks us as belonging to God and initiates us into the community of faith. It doesn't save us or protect us from sin. And it's not baptism that ensures that we will have life everlasting in God's realm - God does that. Neither does baptism make us fit for heaven. How we live life does that. For us, baptism is our pass into a community of faith. For us, that community is the community of the followers of Christ. So baptism is about identity and belonging.

That's what Matthew's story is about. Jesus doesn't answer the Pharisees' question. He has them look at a coin - a coin with the head of Caesar on it and asks them what they see. In *seeing* is the answer. Give to caesar what belongs to caesar and to God what belongs to God.

Jesus turns their trick question into a lesson - a meditation on belonging. It's true that the coin belongs to caesar. But that answer contains another question: how can we live as people who belong to God in a world that belongs to caesar?

It's no less a question for us. Baptism is that sign that marks us, that brands us, as *belonging* to God and not to any caesar. How do we, God's people, live in a world owned and operated by the powers of consumerism, materialism and coercion? How do we work in such a world with integrity, justice, persuasion and peace? How do we live out the hospitality and grace that God calls us to? And most of all how do we live in the shalom, the kingdom of God - God's realm of abundance and love?

Jesus stories, parables and sayings keep moving us in one God centred direction. They offer clues but, as in this story, we have to figure them out.

The first clue is in being open to the heart of God. How? By moving God to the centre of our concern in life. By asking ourselves what would God want in this situation? And it means asking that in every moment of our existence. Every moment. That's why I keep calling the Christian life a spiritual discipline. For if we are really to be open to God's heart and God's desires for the well-being of the world, we have to practice being open, listening for what God wants for us. And that listening and opening is creating an attitude of prayer.

The second way we move toward a God centred life is by having our minds transformed by the wisdom of God. This means reflecting critically on our tradition: asking questions of it, being open and aware of God's realm present in every millisecond of life and nurturing that. We do this every Sunday in worship, in various study groups throughout the community during the week. We subject the texts to the overarching criteria: does it bear witness to a God of boundless love and compassion? This is contemplation - the hard work of study, prayer meditation and reflection that informs our action in the world.

We know that people who met Jesus felt that they had encountered the living God - the God of love and compassion. Jesus continually lived as though the kingdom of God was present in everyday life. He continually bore witness to God - a God whose nature was boundless love and compassion. Because people experienced God in Jesus he is a sacrament, a sign of God's loving presence. People participated in that experience of God just by being with him.

Encountering God is a sacrament - a sacred moment. Every moment of clarity, meaning, insight is a sacrament. Those moments that take us out of ourselves, out of ordinary time are sacramental moments.

So today, baptism is a rite of initiation that makes us members of the church. Yes. But more than that. Baptism is a sacrament. It is a sign of God's grace upon the newest member of God's community and through him to us. It is a sign of the very presence of God in this place, in our community, in our lives. And it makes the kingdom of God, the shalom of God present for us in a vivid and real way.

When we renew our own vows, as we do when we say the Creed, when we experience the abundance of God's grace in the sprinkling of the water on our newest member, we participate again in the sacrament - the presence of God with us. We renew our commitment to become that channel of God's boundless grace and love for others, through opening our hearts to God and our minds to the transforming wisdom of God. We commit ourselves to becoming a window into the very nature of God for those around us. We commit ourselves to being a sacrament for others.

It is a tall order. But our baptism reassures us that we belong to a generous gracious God. A God who continually and patiently lures us to live sacramentally, to create God's shalom, God's kingdom, here on earth for the good of ourselves and for all of creation. Amen.