



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Jesus' Baptism and Yours

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

October 18, 2009

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

Mark 10:35-45

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James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They replied, "We are able." Then Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. So Jesus called them and said to them, "You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

We are nearing the end of our journey through Mark's Gospel. The truth is that the end of Mark is right there at the beginning. The whole gospel shows Jesus making a journey to Jerusalem and the Cross. For Mark, there is no slowing down—no side detours—no turning from the journey that Jesus is making. Mark leaves us know doubt in his gospel: Jesus knows where he is going and Mark wants us to join him on the way.

Our reading today is taken from a major section of Mark's Gospel, and that section begins and ends with a story of Jesus healing a blind man. In the story immediately following our reading today, Mark tells us about blind Bartimaeus, who is sitting beside the road in Jericho as Jesus passes by. We'll listen to that story next week, but perhaps you remember that Bartimaeus kept crying out for mercy, asking to be healed, as Jesus passed by. And then, at the very end of the story, Mark gives us the news. He tells us that Bartimaeus got up and followed Jesus on the way—which is, of course, exactly what Mark

wants all of us to do as well.

But that's next week's story, and it comes at the end of this section of Mark's Gospel. But there is another healing story at the beginning of this section, which comes prior to our passage today. I think it's one of the keys to understanding our passage this morning.

In that earlier story, a blind man comes up to Jesus and asks Jesus to give him sight. Mark tells us that Jesus takes some dirt and mixes it with his spit, and then touches the man's eyes. And Jesus asks him, "Can you see?"

And the man says, "Yes, I see men, but they look like trees walking."

So Jesus touches him again and he finally sees clearly.

I've come to think that James and John are in the same boat as that man. They come up to Jesus and ask for a blanket yes: "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." Jesus is too smart for that, so he asks them what it is exactly that they want him to do for them. "Oh, it's not much. We just want to sit on either side of you in glory. Can you make that happen for us, Jesus?"

Their request indicates that they see Jesus well enough to leave everything and follow him. But ask them—can you "see" Jesus, and listen to what they would most likely say. I think they would have to say something like this: "Yes, we see Jesus, but it looks like 'glory' walking."

It was clear that James and John had not learned everything they needed to know about Jesus. That's why they ask for a place of glory. They had heard the good parts of Jesus' predictions, but they had conveniently missed that Jesus' glory would only come through suffering.

It's enough to make you wonder how they could have missed it. Three times in Mark's Gospel, including immediately before our passage this morning, Jesus had told the disciples quite plainly what was coming: "The Son of Man is going up to Jerusalem, and will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him; and spit upon him; and flog him; and they will kill him. And after three days he will rise again." As Mark tells it, those were the last words Jesus spoke prior to James and John coming up to ask Jesus about their place in glory alongside Jesus.

Donald Meichenbaum, a widely-known psychotherapist, once told of the time his car was struck by lightning while he was driving. Once he was safely home, Meichenbaum, expecting to get some sympathy, began to share his ordeal with his teenage son. Instead of offering sympathy, his son cut him off with this: "Dad, let's go buy a lottery ticket. They say the chances of being hit by lightning are like the chances of winning the lottery."

James and John are every bit as self-absorbed as that son. But for James and John, it's not simply a matter of bad timing. More than that, it's a matter of bad understanding.

I think Jesus must have looked at them with the same look he had given to the man he had healed, but who saw men who looked like trees walking. And so Jesus touches them again—or in this case, he teaches them yet again that his is a strange glory, and that his power and glory are not what they are used to at all. And then he asks them: "Are you

able to drink the cup that I will drink? Or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

I’ve heard that question hanging in the air at every baptism that I’ve ever been a part of, whether as pastor, or as the member of the congregation, or as a father. There simply is no getting around that baptism is one of the most important groundings of the church’s whole theology. Baptism tells us about our naming and calling God, and it also tells us about our life in Christ.

That’s why we talk about baptism so much in the church, and why we’re hopeful as a congregation that those we baptize will remember and talk about with each other the day they were baptized. That’s why we’ve started giving those baptized a candle. Today, we will light a candle for Emily in the context of her baptism, and then we’ll give it to her and her family so that they can pull it out each year—each October 18—to remember the people who were here and the promises that they and God and the congregation made this day. In that remembering, Emily and those around her will be reminded of the truth we celebrate in her baptism today—that she is one of God’s beloved children.

One of my favorite children’s books is called *Water, Come Day: The Day You Were Baptized*, which ends with these words of welcome to the newly baptized:

“All of us now, on earth and in heaven,
one mouth, ten mouths, ten million and seven,
greet you, friend. We’re glad you came—so glad we stand and applaud.

And we call you by your brand-new name; Beautiful, beautiful child of flame, You are the *Child of God*.”

That is the powerful statement which baptism makes for Emily’s life—and for ours. We have been named by God.

But there is more to baptism than that naming, than that identity we are given. Remember that question hanging in the air? “Are you able to drink the cup that I will drink? Or to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

You see, baptism isn’t just sweet identity. There is also the strange truth that in baptism, we are baptized into Christ Jesus. We are baptized into service. Some of you were probably baptized with the liturgy from the *Book of Worship* which said this right after the person was baptized: “Welcome to the ministry of Jesus Christ.”

With that in mind, today is Emily’s great naming day, but it is also her calling day. This is the day that she is ushered into the way of Jesus Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve.

Perhaps one final word is needed. When we baptize Emily today, we will be focusing all of this naming and calling of God for her life. We do that, of course, so that we also discover or remember that truth for our lives as well.