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Matthew 3:13-17 and Acts 10:34-48
Baptismal Water For All People

We have heard the words proclaiming the baptism of Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew. And the Gospel of Matthew ends with these words, a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples recorded in chapter 28: “Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw Jesus, they worshiped him, but they doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Our second scripture this morning is a fulfillment of this baptismal command from the book of Acts. This morning we find the apostle Peter in Caesarea – a town built by King Herod (yes – that King Herod). It was the Roman governmental center of Judea, home to Roman courts of law, as well as the headquarters for the Roman military forces that occupied Judea. Not really the kind of place you expect to find Peter not long after Jesus’ crucifixion. Much like our message last week from the visit of the magi, Peter, a Jewish fisherman from Galilee, was far removed from his familiar life and ways. And yet, here he is sharing the good news of Jesus Christ to this non-Jewish community of Gentiles. I’m going to breaking our scripture up into two pieces this morning, first sharing the apostle Peter’s sermon followed by the response to the sermon. Hear now these words from Acts 10:34-43 using the Common English Bible (CEB) translation.

Peter said, “I really am learning that God doesn’t show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. This is the message of peace he sent to the Israelites by proclaiming the good news through Jesus Christ: He is Lord of all! You know what happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism John preached. You know about Jesus of Nazareth, whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and endowed with power. Jesus traveled around doing good and healing everyone oppressed by the devil because God was with him. We are witnesses of everything he did, both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him up on the third day and allowed him to be seen, not by everyone but by us. We are witnesses whom God chose beforehand, who ate and drank with him after God raised him from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

As sermons go, Peter does a masterful job summarizing the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. You may remember that Peter preaches a longer version of this message to the pious Jewish people from every nation who gathered in Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost. In our text this morning, Peter has managed to cut his Pentecost sermon in half (something preachers might take heed of!) to distill the Good News of Jesus to a group of Gentiles.

One of the tensions of the early church was how to live into the words of the Great Commission I shared from the end of Matthew's Gospel. Words that are echoed by Jesus in the beginning of the book of Acts: "and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." Sounds great doesn't it...you will make disciples of all nations... you will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth...but the reality of how those who were followers of Jesus who came from the Jewish tradition and those who came from non-Jewish traditions learned to worship, pray and yes, eat together was fraught with tension to put it mildly. The ensuing culture clashes resulted in conflicts big and small, as the Book of Acts and Paul's various letters share. It was not rainbows and unicorns in those early days. Nor has it been rainbows and unicorns since.

The work of the church is hard and it requires transformation – and praise be that the work of transformation is led by the work of the Holy Spirit. Because it was solely up to us, I imagine the outcome would not be the same. I think Peter would say Amen to that as well, for in this section of the Book of Acts we see some dramatic changes in Peter's understanding of who God is calling into the body of believers and what they need to do to be welcomed into the family of faith.

Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, shares Peter's mind change this way.... A few days before our story in Caesarea, Peter was in the town of Joppa, healing and preaching. About noon one day Peter went out on the balcony to pray. While praying Peter got hungry and started thinking about lunch. While lunch was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the skies open up. Something that looked like a huge blanket was lowered and settled on the ground. Every kind of animal and reptile and bird you could think of was on it. Then a voice came: "Go to it, Peter—kill and eat."

Peter said, "Oh, no, Lord. I've never so much as tasted food that was not kosher." The voice came a second time: "If God says it's okay, it's okay." This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the skies. Peter was puzzled by this vision, but his ruminations were interrupted by three men who showed up at the house where Peter was staying and invited him to go to Caesarea to the home a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, so Cornelius could hear what Peter had to say. And Peter went.¹

That is where we pick up our story this morning. Peter is at Cornelius' house where people have gathered and he shares with them the Good News of Jesus Christ. Peter proclaims, "I

¹ Acts 10 in *The Message*. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Acts%2010&version=MSG>

really am learning that God doesn't show partiality to one group of people over another. Rather, in every nation, whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him. Talk about Good News. Peter tells them how the message of Jesus was spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee and then through Judea and continued as the disciples witnessed Jesus after the resurrection. And he invites these non-Jewish gentiles to hear the Good News – the good news of the free gift of grace that fill us – fill us to overflowing in a world that that says we have to fit a certain set of parameters to be loved. And now we hear the rest of the story, what happens following Peter's sermon. Hear now these words from Acts 10:44-48.

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. They heard them speaking in other languages and praising God. Peter asked, "These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized with water, can they?" He directed that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited Peter to stay for several days. **The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

We heard these words from the Gospel of Matthew: And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from the heavens said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

And Peter had an epiphany – a sudden revelation – "These people have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. Surely no one can stop them from being baptized with water, can they?" What a change in the mind and posture of Peter. He says nothing about the need for circumcision or following the dietary laws or keeping the Sabbath. The Holy Spirit has not only transformed these Gentiles into followers of Jesus. The Spirit has also transformed Peter into a radical act of invitation and welcome, as he understands that the Spirit was poured out "even on" the Gentiles.

Peter welcomed the Gentiles into the fold. He told all who would listen that these new believers belonged – belonged in body and soul – to the community of believers who followed Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit put an end to controlling who is in and who is out. New Testament professor the Rev. Dr. Eric Barreto, says it this way: "A Christian vision of belonging is also a giving up of control. We have been invited into the life of a God who invites people we would prefer God would not invite. That reality of a wild God who continues to draw people together who we would prefer not to be together, is where the real challenge of the Christian witness of belonging lies."²

² Eric Barreto and Willie James Jennings. *Belonging*. *Presbyterian Outlook* . April 5, 2023. Available online at <https://pres-outlook.org/2023/03/belonging/>

Friends, the Holy Spirit put an end to controlling who is in and who is out. Now while the Presbyterian Church is not known for its high pneumatology – that is the theology of the Holy Spirit – Baptism of the Lord Sunday gives us an opportunity to highlight the work of the Spirit in our faith. In the bulletin I share words of preparation from the *PC(USA) Book of Common Worship*: “Through baptism, **the Holy Spirit** gives the Church its identity and commissions the Church for service in the world. Baptism is the bond of unity in Jesus Christ. When we are baptized, we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place. In Christ, barriers of race, status, and gender are overcome; we are called to seek reconciliation in the Church and world, in Jesus’ name.”³

This morning as part of our worship service we are reaffirming the promises of our own baptism and the baptism of others in the family of faith. Baptism is a way we mark our incorporation into the church – into the one body of Jesus Christ. “Presbyterians describe baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace made by God through Jesus and extended to us. In baptism, God claims us as beloved children and members of Christ’s body, the church, washing us clean from sin as we renounce the power of evil and seek the will and way of God.”⁴

In the Presbyterian reformed tradition, we baptize only once. As there is one body, there is one baptism. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) recognizes all baptisms by other Christian churches that are administered with water and performed in the name of the triune God-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Both believers and their children are included in God's covenant love. The baptism of believers witnesses to the truth that God's gift of grace calls for our grateful response. The baptism of our young children witnesses to the truth that God claims people in love even before they are able to respond in faith. Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace is **offered to all people**.

Baptism, then, is about celebrating the gift we receive as individuals and as a community. It is statement of identity and it is a statement of responsibility. Jesus’ baptism was the beginning of his public ministry. Just following our passage this morning, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for a time of fasting and testing. At the conclusion of the 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus calls disciples to join him in his ministry, and he goes throughout all Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. Jesus’ baptism began his public witness. It began his fulfillment of the scriptures that one from the line of King David who

³Baptism. *PC(USA) Book of Common Worship*, Westminster John Knox Press; 2018, p 404.

⁴ David Gambrell. What Presbyterians believe: the sacrament of baptism. *Presbyterian News*. January 21, 2016. <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2016/1/21/what-presbyterians-believe-baptism/>. The following section utilizes material from this article, as well as the W-3.04 Sacrament. *PC(USA) Book of Order 2019-2023*; Westminster John Knox Press, 2019.

would usher in a new kingdom. Jesus' baptism began the journey to the cross, his death and his resurrection.

Like Jesus, for each us, baptism is a public mark on our journey of life, a journey that ends with our mortal death as we live into the promise of eternal life. Each funeral and memorial service I officiate, I include these words: "Name of the one who has died, child of the covenant, has completed their baptismal journey to be united with Christ. We give thanks to God for accompanying them on their journey in life and in death, praising God that they are walking in the newness of life, never to die again, for death no longer has dominion over them. They are a new creation, delighting in the Lord and the Lord delighting in them."

And for each us baptism is a public mark of our journey of discipleship, like that of Jesus. It is a call for us to repent of our sinfulness, of our separation from God and each other. It is our call to be a witness of hope in a world of despair. When the powers of the world, when the powers of corruption, bigotry, hatred, violence, and yes evil, threaten to run us over, we remember that we were claimed by Christ. We have been marked by Christ's love and grace and called for a purpose, a purpose to bring Christ's vision of the Church to reality. Like the disciples, we as individuals will be asked to claim our identity as beloved children of God. And we will be asked as the Church to claim "the bond of unity in Jesus Christ." To proclaim that "when we are baptized, we are made one with Christ, with one another, and with the Church of every time and place." We celebrate that baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is at once God's gift of grace, God's means of grace, and God's call to respond to that grace. Through baptism, Jesus Christ calls us to repentance, faithfulness, and discipleship.⁵ The waters of baptism truly are for all people as the apostle Peter recognized so long ago. Amen.

⁵Baptism. *PC(USA) Book of Common Worship*, Westminster John Knox Press; 2018, p 404.