

Genesis 1:1-5

Mark 1:4-11

TEARING DOWN THE BARRIERS

A Sunday School teacher was trying to teach her young students the Ten Commandments. She thought it would be helpful if she read some illustrations. "Early one Saturday morning Johnny's parents were going shopping," she read to them. "They asked Johnny to wash the dishes while they were gone. When they returned, however, Johnny was watching cartoons and the dishes still were unwashed." In one accord, the class responded, "Honor thy Father and Mother!" "Good," said the teacher. "Mary went shopping with her mother; when no one was looking, she slipped a candy bar into her pocket." Again, the class was quick: "Thou shalt not steal!" "Great," said the teacher. "Tony was a cruel boy and had a bad temper. He got angry with his little sister one day, and, grabbing her pet kitten, he threatened to pull its tail off." Now this was a much tougher example. Everyone was real quiet for a moment but then one fellow brightened up and shouted, "I know. What God hath joined together let no one put asunder!"

Even though that wasn't the answer the teacher was looking for, it's one we can use this morning to get the sermon up and running. As Tony's answer suggests - and this is certainly supported by renewed conflict in Gaza and ongoing turmoil in other "hot spots" like Iraq and Afghanistan - the world is not what God created and intends for it to be. In the very act of creation, God has joined us together - with both God and each other. God created in love, and there was purpose, order, peace, and beauty to the world God had fashioned. However, human sinfulness entered this serene setting and distorted the image of God within us and around us. While the Lord our God yearns to join all things together, the human tendency is to set up barriers and dividing walls that provide privacy and security while keeping others in their places - keeping them out and away!

Be that as it may, the Lord God has acted repeatedly to turn people (God's own chosen ones and all others) away from sin and back toward God. Throughout human history, God has sought to save us from ourselves for God refuses to allow us to settle for less. God has a vision concerning the world (particularly humankind), and that vision includes all of us joined together with both God and each other. God has acted to tear down the barriers and turn the vision into a glorious reality!

In today's Gospel lesson, we see God at work in the person of John the Baptist. John appeared in the Judean wilderness and he proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In order to prepare for the One who was coming, John told his audience they were required to make three responses: there needed to be a recognition of separation from God (confession), a radical turn away from sin and turn toward God (repentance), and a fresh spiritual dedication of themselves (baptism). The people flocked to hear John's message, they took to heart his call to repentance, and, wading into the Jordan River, they confessed their sins, were baptized, and washed clean.

Here, in the biblical narrative, is where the story takes quite a turn and becomes good news for us all. In time, Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John (his cousin) in the Jordan. If John's baptism was for repentance and the forgiveness of sins, why did Jesus, who was sinless, allow himself to be baptized? Why was that necessary?

Jesus realized that his time of preparation was finally over and the time had come for him to begin the task of establishing God's kingdom here on earth. It was time once again to tear down the barriers, which existed between sinful humanity and God, and build bridges that connected humankind with both God and one another. Furthermore, Jesus was baptized in order to say that water baptism is okay, a fitting symbol of repentance, but Spirit baptism will truly transform and empower a person. Finally, Jesus was baptized in order to identify with all the others, who had come to repent from their sins and be baptized. Though Jesus was/is the Son of God, who has come into the world, he claimed our sinful humanity as his own rather than sinless deity. He would do the very same at the end of his public ministry when Jesus went to the cross and became sin for our sakes. In baptism, Jesus stood by the side of sinners.

Notice what happened next according to Mark: “And just as Jesus was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart...” In other words, God ripped open the heavens; the veil between God and us was stripped away. Now, in Jesus, nothing was standing between us and the very throne of God. In that moment, God bridged the gap between us forever, starting from God’s side. Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove on him. He heard the voice of God from heaven, saying, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” With this divine announcement, Jesus understood that his baptism signaled the beginning of his ministry.

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, we rejoice that God, in Jesus Christ, has torn down the barriers. Jesus identified himself with all of us, and, in taking his place with sinners, he made it possible for us to find our way back to God and take our place alongside each other. He has reconciled all things to himself! To be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to recognize that, when we truly repent of our sins, we are indeed forgiven. Also, we have immense worth as the sons and daughters of God. The Lord our God also says to each one of us: “You are my son, my daughter; you are the Beloved of God; with you, I am well pleased.” In baptism, God adopts us as his very own. God reaches for us and claims us as God’s chosen children, heirs of Christ. We are blessed with immense worth, now and forever.

Finally, as Jesus’ own baptism reminds us, our baptism is not the end. Rather, it is the beginning of a lifelong pilgrimage with God. Every day, we strive to live out our baptism by sharing in Jesus’ ministry to others. God has turned toward us so that we might turn to God and point others to God as well. In our own baptism, we identify with Jesus, his faithful obedience to God, and his servant ministry to others. In baptism, and in the name of Jesus, we too go forth to love and serve the world and tear down barriers.

Let us live out our baptisms. In baptism, we are reminded again and again of Whose we are and what we are called to do. Transformed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we do our part and strive to make a difference in the world as we seek and serve to “share God’s love, embrace our neighbor, and nurture each other.” While that is certainly the calling of these new elders who will begin serving on the Session, it is also the job description of every baptized, Christian disciple.

I would like to close with this simple-yet-profound story. “Tell me the weight of a snowflake,” a sparrow asked a wild dove. “The weight of a snowflake,” answered the dove, “is nothing more than nothing.” “In that case I must tell you a marvelous story,” said the sparrow. “I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow – not heavily, not in a giant blizzard – no, just like in a dream without any violence. Since I didn’t have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,952. Then the next snowflake dropped on the branch – “nothing more than nothing,” as you say – and the branch broke off.” Having said that, the sparrow flew away. The dove, since Noah’s time, an authority on such matters, thought about the story for awhile, and finally said to herself: “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come about in this world.” (Keith Wagner, *Lectionary Homiletics*, January 2009, p. 56)

Let us live out our baptisms as best we can. The kind word we speak, the cup of cold water we give, the compassionate concern or listening ear we offer, may just be the one thing that is lacking for peace to come about in this world, for barriers to be torn down, and for relationships between God and others to be reestablished. Let us live out our baptisms to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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