

Imperfect Followers

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
January 13, 2019—The Baptism of Jesus

- 1 John 1:5-9 (Good News Translation) ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us. ⁹ But if we confess our sins to God, he will keep his promise and do what is right: he will forgive us our sins and purify us from all our wrongdoing.
- Luke 3:7a, 15-17, 21-23a (Good News Translation) ⁷ Crowds of people came out to John to be baptized by him.... ¹⁵ People's hopes began to rise, and they began to wonder whether John perhaps might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ So John said to all of them, "I baptize you with water, but someone is coming who is much greater than I am. I am not good enough even to untie his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ He has his winnowing shovel with him, to thresh out all the grain and gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn the chaff in a fire that never goes out...." ²¹ After all the people had been baptized, Jesus also was baptized. While he was praying, heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit came down upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you." ²³ When Jesus began his work, he was about thirty years old....
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Accepting the reality of our imperfection, nevertheless we strive to present God's will to the world through our words, our thoughts, our actions.

If it seems to you that time is flying by, consider how the tradition of the church reckons the passage to time. Just three weeks ago we celebrated the Nativity – the birth of Jesus. Last Sunday we commemorated the tradition of the Wise Men's visit to Mary and the child. Based on clues we read in the gospels we were reminded that Jesus was probably a toddler under the age of two at that point. Based on how the Christian Church celebrates the life of Jesus every year, Jesus aged two years in two weeks.

But here we are today marking the baptism of Jesus. Mary and Joseph didn't present him for baptism as a baby like we often do today. Luke states that Jesus was about thirty years old when Jesus himself sought to be baptized. So in less than a month we've spanned thirty of the thirty-three years of the life of Jesus. But that shouldn't surprise us; the gospels themselves don't spend much time on the infancy and childhood of Jesus: in the combined eighty-nine chapters of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, only four of those chapters are about his pre-adult years. In fact, the gospels of Mark and John *only* deal with Jesus as an adult.

Jesus' baptism is mentioned in Matthew, Mark and Luke. All three descriptions are rather brief, and there are slight variations in the three accounts.

Wouldn't you agree that being baptized seems to be a pretty significant step for Jesus? So why *didn't* the evangelists write more about it in their gospels? Bible scholars believe that the early Christian church had some "difficulty with, if not embarrassment over, the fact that Jesus was baptized."¹

What was the problem? What might be difficult or embarrassing? To answer that let's look at John the Baptist. His mother was Elizabeth. Mary went to visit Elizabeth after Mary received that angelic message telling her that she herself was pregnant with a child she was to

¹ Fred Craddock: Interpretation: Luke—a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching. Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990, 50

name Jesus. Mary visited Elizabeth because they were related. Traditionally they are described as “cousins,” but the Greek word interpreted to mean “cousin” can also mean “...’kinfolk, relative’ or any relationship that implies blood lines.”² So John the Baptist was related to Jesus somehow, and perhaps they were playmates as children; while growing up maybe they saw each other frequently.

But in time while Jesus probably worked at the carpentry or masonry trade he had learned from Joseph, John had left home and set out on a personal cross-country crusade. John was passionate about the Jewish people’s need to prepare for God’s promised anointed one. That God-anointed savior (or in Hebrew, “messiah”) had been described by prophets and anticipated by generations upon generations of people. John sensed that the messiah was not only coming, but coming soon, and now was the time for people to recall their faith, to clean up their act, to turn around their lives, or in a word, to “repent.”

John’s preaching prodded and encouraged and chastised and warned and challenged people to repent. John urged them to regret how they fell short and to resolve to live more uprightly. And to mark their commitment, John called them to submit to a familiar ritual symbolizing shedding the past and starting fresh and clean – he called them to be baptized. That’s how John became known as “the baptizer” or “the Baptist.”

So John may have been a little rough-around-the-edges, a little coarse, perhaps, maybe a little strident. But for the earliest Christians there was nothing particularly difficult or embarrassing about John. The early Church saw nothing wrong with calling people to repent of their failings, their slip-ups, their self-centeredness, their sinfulness. Except... why did *Jesus* come to receive the mark of baptism? The early church had difficulty with that idea... and we still do even today.

Was there a part of the life of Jesus that needed repentance? That would have been embarrassing. But there’s nothing in the Bible to suggest anything like that. So again, why would Jesus have sought out the ritual of baptism that was being offered to signal one’s repentance for sinful words or deeds or omissions or failures?

Maybe we are to see Christ’s submission to baptism as another signal of God’s true incarnation in Jesus. Jesus connecting with the reality of our daily lives was a confirmation to the world of God’s intent to live among us fully, to share our lives completely. Jesus of Nazareth wouldn’t be like a celebrity who was protected by handlers, always surrounded by the comforts of life, spared the inconveniences common to the average guy. Jesus wouldn’t insist on being kept far away from the hardships and disappointments and struggles and anxieties that are an everyday part of real life in our world. In the waters of baptism Jesus was immersed into the hopes and disappointments, the progress and the setbacks, the delights and the sorrows that are our lives. The perfect Son of God knows our life in all its *imperfection*.

God doesn’t expect perfection from us. We may foist such expectations on ourselves – or on others – but God in Jesus Christ knows that while we strive for goodness, our reality is that we are prone to imperfection, that sometimes our best intentions fail to materialize. Perhaps one of our most common sins is believing that we are perfect. The First Letter of John holds up a mirror before us in those words we heard earlier: “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and there is no truth in us.”³ God knows we are not perfect; we probably should remember that, too.

² Sandra Sweeney Silver, “Jesus and John the Baptist Were Relatives,” <https://earlychurchhistory.org/daily-life/jesus-and-john-the-baptist/>, accessed 1/10/2019

³ 1 John 1:8 Good News Translation

In his book Let Me Tell You a Story, sociologist and popular Christian author Tony Campolo has reminded us that

“St. Francis of Assisi, once said, ‘We should preach the gospel all day long – and if necessary, use words.’ [Campolo goes on to say] It’s obvious that the kind of people we are and the way in which we live must back up our witness, but we cannot wait until we’re perfect to declare the gospel. We must make the message clear as best we can, given our limitations.”⁴

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopalian priest, professor, and best-selling author. In her book Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith she reflected on what it means to be ordained to ministry. But I printed her comment on the front cover of today’s bulletin because I think her comment applies not only to professional clergy but to any person who wants to embody godliness in his or her life. She wrote, “Being ordained is not about serving God perfectly, but about serving God visibly, allowing other people to learn whatever they can from watching you rise and fall.”⁵

And isn’t that a reasonable expectation for us: not “serving God perfectly”, but “serving God visibly.” Rather than be paralyzed to inaction by a fear of falling short of perfection, we can try to let our desire to serve God “visibly” steer our lives.

- For instance, no matter what situation we find ourselves in – whether in a business meeting or attending a social event, sitting in a classroom or gathered in a church, can we remember what it’s like being an *outsider* and consequently summon the courage to extend a word and gesture of welcome to strangers in our midst wherever we are?
- Can we keep foremost in our mind that the treasures in our possession are what God has entrusted to us to use not only for ourselves but for the blessing we can bring to the world?
- How about seeking to bring calm and reason, respect and safety to situations charged with passion, or tension, or chaos, or anger?
- Or let’s resolve to think not only of our situation right now, but rather to be mindful of how what we do *now* can plant seeds that will bear fruit for future generations.

We will not be perfect; our deeds will not always meet our aspirations. But as God’s children we strive to present God’s will to the world through our words, our thoughts, our actions. When we fall short, may we and others learn from our failure so that our next effort will be better. When we succeed, God’s will is made visible to the world and God be praised!

[sermons: se20190113; © 2019 Jon M. Fancher]

⁴ Tony Campolo, Let Me Tell You a Story: life lessons from unexpected places and unlikely people. Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000, 107

⁵ Barbara Brown Taylor, Leaving Church: a memoir of faith. New York: HarperCollins, 2006 (quotation from this book was seen on a post on Facebook)