

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 7, 2018

“You Count.”

Mark 1:2-11

Today is a good day to say a good word about baptism. I suppose any Sunday is really an appropriate day for a word about baptism, but today we have heard scripture loaded with images of baptism, so it's a good day to speak about that which is often close at hand that we may sometimes miss the significance.

Psalm 29, which is on our list of scripture today, uses the imagery of water to declare the tremendous power of God:

“The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters.”

In the gospel, Jesus emerges from the waters of his own baptism and hears the affirming voice of God: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” While those words are especially meaningful in the gospel about Jesus, they are words which are spoken to us all, in a way. That is the declaration made at our baptism, yours and mine. If we are baptized in infancy or childhood, before we have had a word to say either one way or the other, God has declared his pleasure in us, his satisfaction that his creation in us is good, is worthy, that we are God's beloved creations.

The voice that we hear when baptism is celebrated these days in the church are like voices that have spoken such words over the centuries: “Child of God and child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It is a phrase that has been used in the most solemn of christenings in the highest and holiest cathedral churches in the world, and whispered at furtive services of baptism in the hidden yet faithful churches and places where Christianity is forbidden. It has been spoken in makeshift settings by riverbanks and beside hospital gurneys, next to tiny bowls of water, and on the shores of mighty seas. It is a phrase that says and promises much more than the person saying it can possibly foresee. Or the person receiving the words can fully comprehend.

I sometimes have to smile when I am asked...as I often am...whether baptism shouldn't wait until the “age of understanding,” when a child is ten or twelve years old and can make his or her own confession of faith. While I can appreciate the hope of that confession of faith will some day be made by all the children of the church, I smile at the thought of some coming “age of understanding,” that at a

certain age we will somehow comprehend what God is up to in the whole business of baptism. Even after years of considering what we're doing in the sacrament of baptism, I don't pretend to understand its mystery fully, any more than I claim to know the mind of God.

Why does baptism matter? What are the voices speaking at baptism trying to say? Is it just a little drip of water, a few mumbled words? Baptism matters because it is a reminder that we are who God says we are, regardless what anyone else may say about us. Baptismal voices remind us that our true identity is not what we may choose for ourselves or what others may say about us, but what God has chosen about us. His word about us is always, "child of the covenant..." That is one reason baptism matters.

Do you remember the movie of a few years ago, titled, *Oh Brother, Where Art Thou?* Watching that film was the first time I ever heard the song, "Down To The River To Pray," that has since been arranged as a choral anthem. Seeing the river baptism scene in the movie, or any baptism on any given Sunday, we may think, why does baptism matter?

In Flannery O'Connor's short story, "The River," a woman named Mrs. Connin is employed to care for the son of some wealthy but uncaring parents. The boy's mother is sick one day, and to get the boy out of his mother's sight, Mrs. Connin takes the boy to a riverside baptismal service of her church. Standing on the riverbank, they hear the preacher warning the crowd that if they've come for an easy miracle, if they come to leave their pain in the river, they've come for the wrong reasons. "There ain't but one river," he declares, "and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' blood. It's a river of pain, to be washed away slow..."

Suddenly Mrs. Connin lifts the boy up in the air and asks the preacher to pray for the boy's mother. But then, embarrassed, she whispers to the preacher that she suspects the boy has never been baptized, and the preacher commands her to hand the boy to him. "Do you want to be baptized?" he asks him. And when the boy says, "Yes," the preacher responds, "You won't be the same again. You'll count!"

Why is baptism important? It is a visible and a verbal sign that we "count" to the people who stand with us, who stand behind us, for whom we stand, to all the people who confess the name that matters most, and most of all, that we count to that One who was one day baptized by John into a ministry that would serve to save us all. That riverside preacher was right. When we know fully and finally what Jesus has done for us, we are never the same again. We count.

Jesus was baptized one bright day. I can hardly think that he ever again walked by the banks of the Jordan River—or any river—without thinking about that day when the skies were opened and he heard the voice of God declaring his love and confidence. Today, if you pass by the baptismal font, think on its water and remember that Jesus was chosen by God and baptized. So are you; God has chosen you, that his very word to and about you was once spoken over you “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”
You will never be the same again. You count. Amen.