

Born in Dissent

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Luke 3:7-22; Romans 12:9-13 & 21

Luke 3:3-22

John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus. He was a Jewish ascetic who lived in the wilderness and dressed in prophet's attire of camel hair clothes and subsisted on locusts and honey. God's call comes to John for the people to repent from their sins, but he taught forgiveness through baptism and not temple sacrifices. He called the people instead to the ethical principles of the Jewish law, placing him at odds with official Judaism. The people respond in throngs to be baptized by John, and Jesus joins them on the banks of the Jordan River. He is the one, John says, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

John's proclamation in Luke 3 is familiar to us from the chorus in Handel's Messiah, "Every valley shall be exalted."

The Proclamation of John the Baptist

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

"What then should we do?" "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

"I baptize you with water; but one who is coming will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The Baptism of Jesus

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This morning—a lesson in Baptist history.

In 1612, Thomas Helwys told King James of England—the same King James that has a version of the Bible named after him—that the King had no power over a person's religious belief. "(The people's) religion is betwixt God and themselves," Helwys said. "Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews, or whatsoever, it is not for the earthly power to punish them in the least measure." Helwys was one of the first to declare publicly his belief in religious liberty for all, and he was one of our first Baptists. For his challenge to King James, Helwys spent the rest of his life in an English prison, but his legacy, his dissent from uniting the power of the Church of England with the Crown has helped to define what it means to call ourselves Baptists today.

In the tradition of Thomas Helwys, American Baptists are a denomination born in dissent. It is one of our most prized traditions that we can celebrate as we approach the 150th anniversary of the founding of Seattle First Baptist Church in 1869. The Congregational Separatists who founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony came to America in the 1600's to be free from the Church of England. But

their purpose was to establish religious freedom only for themselves, and so they established a community in which one was required to be a member of their church in order to vote, a theocracy. Roger Williams, who had also come from England seeking religious freedom, objected to this close relationship between the church and the colonial civil government and insisted that religious matters were not the business of government. For his troubles he was driven out of the colony.

Williams went south with the help of the Narragansett Indians, whom he had befriended earlier, and he founded the Providence Plantation. In 1639 he organized the First Baptist Church in America in Providence, and with the help of fellow Baptist minister, John Clarke, he later founded the colony of Rhode Island, based on the theological and political assumption that all people had a right not only to political freedom but also to religious freedom. This principle of religious freedom—to believe or not to believe as one chooses, a revolutionary concept in the world at that time—has been a bedrock Baptist principle in America ever since. It is one of our most defining and enduring characteristics, and it was born out of Williams' dissent to the religious restrictions of the Massachusetts Congregationalists.

Roger Williams' gift to us eventually became one of the cornerstones of the United States Constitution. The colony of Rhode Island was the last to adopt the Constitution. They held out for a Bill of Rights, which included in its first of ten amendments: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Born in dissent!

If any denominational tradition should be an advocate for religious freedom and for civil rights in America, it is we who call ourselves Baptists. That is unfortunately not the case for many fundamentalists, posing as Baptists in recent years, trying to undermine the principles of the First Amendment by insisting that ours is a Christian nation, especially favored by God, just as the Massachusetts Congregationalists tried to do 400 years ago. As Tim Egan points out in yesterday's New York Times, a majority of Republicans "think Christianity should be (our) established national religion."

The First Amendment says something quite different, and they would do well to heed the words of John Leland, a Baptist leader from colonial Virginia, who once said, "Experience...has informed us that the fondness of magistrates to foster Christianity has done it more harm than all the persecutions ever did."

There is within our Baptist tradition a profoundly democratic spirit, a spirit that believes that neither religious nor civil authority has the last word in terms of faith or conscience. We are associational by principle, that is, there are neither bishops who rule over our congregations nor denominational bodies that dictate our belief or practice. For example, the attempts by the American Baptist Churches of the Northwest during the 1990's to disfellowship Seattle First Baptist, under the leadership of Rodney Romney, and University Baptist churches over our decisions to welcome all, without regard to sexual orientation, stands clearly outside of the democratic principle of congregational autonomy that is one of our enduring Baptist principles. The formation of the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches, whereby joining members are welcomed on the basis of their voluntary commitment to the Baptist distinctives of congregational autonomy, soul liberty, priesthood of the believer, and religious freedom, is a more authentic and historic expression of what it means to be a Baptist in America today. Born in dissent!

Luke's gospel emphasizes God's love for the poor, and we see this played out in John the Baptist's call for repentance in today's reading. It's not just a call for personal salvation, but of what Walter Rauschenbusch called social salvation, concern for the human condition and a call to acts of compassion and reconciliation, to change the world as it is into the world as it ought to be, a world

where the love of God is made manifest through our love for one another. “What must we do to be saved?” the people ask John. Share your coats and your food, he says, collect no more taxes than is owed, do not extort money by threats or false accusation. In other words, live morally, live fairly, and live justly. There must be tangible fruits to your repentance.

John’s call for the people to commit their lives to the broad principles of the Jewish law is the context into which Jesus walks to be baptized by John. He stands with the people on the banks of the Jordan and, like them, heeds the call of the Baptist. And Luke says, “...and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’” What is the lesson for us? In all that we do and however we choose to do it as a congregation, God continues to call us, as he called Jesus on the banks of the Jordan River in the spirit of the Hebrew prophets, to stand with the poor, the vulnerable, the outcasts, those whose lives are under threat every day. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer—that great Lutheran Baptist—once said, “The church is the church only when it stands for others.”

If that be the case, then we as faithful Baptist Christians must call out the hypocrisy and the violence of our federal government in confining women and children and families seeking asylum in cages on our southern border without even the basics of health and hygiene, all in the name of protecting Americans from the false claim that somehow these people, who are only looking for a better life for themselves, are somehow a threat to our economy and our safety. This is a lie, it is a lie along with the more than 10,000 verifiable lies that Trump has told during his presidency, and that is not “fake news.” The man is biblically illiterate. When he saw Jesus’ admonition to “suffer the little children to come unto me,” not knowing it meant “to let them come,” he probably said, “Well, I know how to make people suffer!”

In the face of this and other crises, how is God calling us today? We need only look at those Baptist trailblazers that have embodied God’s call in the past to build a church that stands for others through their commitment to the work of peace and justice and human rights. There are so many we could consider from John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrims Progress*; to John Leland, strong advocate for religious freedom in the Constitution; to Helen Barrett Montgomery, social reformer and progressive educator, an ally of Susan B. Anthony, an advocate for women’s suffrage and the first woman president of the Northern (now American) Baptist Convention in 1921; to James Dunn, longtime leader of the Baptist Joint Committee on Religious Liberty in Washington, DC; to Martin Luther King, Jr., our great civil rights leader; to Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund; to John Lewis, young civil rights leader in the 1960’s who has represented Georgia’s fifth congressional district since 1986. Each has demonstrated their willingness to dissent from the world as it is so that they might help to create a world that is more reflective of God’s love for all of humanity.

We can also look right here in the life and history of Seattle First Baptist Church. Did you know that we are an historic peace church? It says so right on our website. So, we should look at those in our own history who have stood in dissent to business as usual. If you walk down the hall past the church office, you will find the Peacemakers room. Go there sometime. Inside, you will find tributes to five of our own—lay-members and pastors—who have stood up for peace and justice and human rights, often in the face of strong criticism and opposition. These are saints in our own midst from whom we might take inspiration and guidance as we consider the future of Seattle First Baptist Church in our 150th year, those who stand in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets that are illustrated on today’s bulletin cover. Here is some of what you will learn:

Elmer Fridell: Pastor, Pacifist, and Protester. Dr. Fridell was our pastor from 1929-1937. Horrified by the carnage of the First World War during his service in the U.S. Army, Dr. Fridell became a

pacifist, determined to preach peace and justice for the rest of his life. Often branded as a Communist by outside groups (and even by some other Baptists), First Baptist stood by him and his leadership in efforts to achieve world peace.

Alice Franklin Bryant: Prisoner of war, author, and activist. Ms. Bryant was a woman whose concern for peace began in a Japanese prison camp. She challenged Washington Senator "Scoop" Jackson for his seat, campaigning with the slogan, "Military strength will not win world peace." Although she lost, she continued her work, saying, "Wild horses couldn't stop me working for peace." Charles Z. Smith, president of the congregation at the time, said, "Mrs. Bryant is our dormant conscience speaking out for justice and peace."

Harold Jensen: Pastor, pacifist, and internment camp protester. Pastor Harold Jensen served as our pastor from 1938-1954 and proclaimed himself to be a pacifist during World War II. With Pastor Jensen's guidance, members of SFBC reached out to our Japanese-American neighbors, who had been sent to internment camps. His courageous stand was not popular, and some in the church wanted to send him away. The matter was settled when one of the deacons stood up and said quietly, "This is a Baptist church. If Harold believes it, then he can preach it."

Robert Walker: Pastor and conscientious objector. Bob Walker grew up in Seattle First Baptist Church. Harold Jensen was his pastor during World War II, and when he graduated from high school, he declared himself a conscientious objector. Refusing service during the war, he served nearly two years at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary. While there he began study for the ministry and was licensed to preach by Seattle First Baptist. After graduating from Andover Newton Seminary near Boston, he served as pastor of congregations in New Hampshire and Washington. He traveled to Europe and the Soviet Union with the Baptist Peace Fellowship in 1956 to meet with local peace leaders. Bob cited two important decisions in his life: going into the ministry and being jailed for his conscientious objection. "I didn't have to do either," he said, "but I knew I would lose something precious if I didn't."

Charles Z. Smith: State supreme court justice and legal advocate. Charles Z. Smith lived a life centered on peacemaking. He served as a justice on the Washington State Supreme Court. In 2005 he received the Dahlberg Peace Award from the American Baptist Churches for his deep commitment to peace and justice. Upon receiving the award, he told of the profound influence that Alice Franklin Bryant and the peacemaking tradition of Seattle First Baptist Church had on him. He was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and he also assisted Vietnamese lawyers who fled to the United States in the wake of the war to help establish legal careers in America.

So American Baptists and Seattle First Baptist can claim a proud tradition in the long line of religious leaders who have stood for peace and justice and human rights, those who have endeavored to be the hands and feet and heart of the one who came to incarnate the love of God for all people.

The name "Baptist" is imprinted on our front door. But it does not matter how we are organized or what the denominational label is on our front door. What finally matters is what we do in the world. Our Baptist principles and our history are merely tools for us to live out our faith. They are important because of the emphasis they place on our freedom to believe, to study, and to act, guided by our own conscience and our best understanding of God's call to us. But if they do not lead to actions that demonstrate our love in the world, as Jesus has commanded us, then they are nothing but dry bones.

The democratic spirit of our Baptist tradition empowers us—each of us—to be agents of God's love and reconciliation in the world: to heal the wounds of the hurting, to comfort the afflicted, to

stand with the weak and the marginalized, and to stand over against the powers and principalities that oppress the poor, discriminate against minorities, and build for war. The freedoms that we celebrate as Baptist Christians are useless if we do not use them. And so, here is a question I will leave with you today: “Who are the dissenters in Seattle First Baptist Church today? Who are the ones who will lay their lives on the line, often at great personal risk? Who will carry on the legacy of those who have preceded us?”

In Romans 12 Paul describes the Marks of the True Christian:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Born in dissent! This is the legacy from our Christian faith that those saints who have lived among us have embodied in our midst, who have been committed to religious liberty and the search for truth, no matter where it leads. They have indeed been “Born in Dissent!” I can say nothing more in closing than, “Let us go forth and do likewise.”
God’s grace and peace and love be with us all.