

REFLECTION ON BAPTISM

Acts 2.41-47

Annual Meeting Sunday, January 22, 2017

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Lesson

After the devastation and the disappointment of the crucifixion of Jesus, the friends of Jesus found themselves filled with a new spirit that had been promised by the Hebrew prophet: “The Spirit will be poured out on all flesh and your sons and your daughters will prophesy; your young shall see visions and your elders will dream dreams; upon everyone, I will pour out my Spirit ... This promise is to you and to your children and to all those who are far off.”

Acts 2.41-47

⁴¹So those who welcomed this message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds* to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home* and ate their food with glad and generous* hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number.

Reflection

I want to thank those who were here yesterday rolling burritos for hungry folks and those who were able to march in the Women’s March. I may not have been able to be with you. But I know some of the people who were there with you in spirit:

May Jones, a woman ordained by this church in 1882. And later the founding pastor of First Baptist Church of Chehalis. I am pretty sure she was there.

Alice Franklin Bryant, a member of this congregation who was held prisoner in a Japanese prison camp but came home after the war to work for peace and reconciliation with Japan. She was a stalwart advocate for justice here at home. “A soldier for peace,” the newspaper called her when she died. You can be sure Alice was marching with you yesterday.

Ruth Rohfls, another member of this congregation who was a leader in the NAACP and a president of our national denomination in 1971 who committed herself to the cause of peace in Vietnam.

I have no doubt those women were marching with you yesterday – which is to say that march has been going on for a long time and, with them, we just need to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Now you might be wondering what the march has to do with baptism.

Well you heard Steve Smith read the lesson for today from Acts 2. As the community of Jesus had to re-imagine itself after the execution of Jesus, that community reached all the way back to the promise of their ancestors – the promise of the Hebrew prophet Joel, that one day the Spirit would be seen working in and through all people; your sons and daughters would prophesy, your young ones would have vision and your elders would dream dreams; the Spirit would be seen working through all people, women and men.

“And,” Peter says to the crowd that day, “this promise is for you and for your children and for all those who are far off;” to those who may be sitting right next to you but may seem far away, different and distant.

Those who received that message – that promise of the spirit on all people - were baptized. And the rest of the book of Acts is about how that early community of Jesus became wider and fuller and more welcoming.

So our Baptist ancestors believed that baptism was a commitment someone was making to receive that message for themselves. For our ancestors, it was an extension of that “soul liberty” we talk about – the value that we can understand our faith and the scriptures in our own experience. That, in other words, no one can do your spirituality for you. And baptism is a commitment people make to take responsibility for their own spiritual lives.

But we do not do that alone. Because baptism is also a commitment the community makes to support each other. The marks of that early baptized community was that they ate together and learned together and shared resources with one another so that people had what they needed. They worked and worshiped together to continue that long march toward that vision of the Spirit at work in everyone.

When we were in Israel we visited the traditional baptismal site of Jesus on the Jordan. It’s not a very impressive place. The river is very narrow and, on one side, are Israeli soldiers and, on the other, are Jordanian soldiers. There are only a few yards of water separating the two. And it occurred to me that this little strip of water could either be seen as a border dividing us or as the water that connects us.

This water – this Jordan – connects us with all those – past, present, and future - who receive this message that the Spirit is at work in us and through us to bless the world with love and justice and peace.

So Paul has come to us to be baptized. And I invite you to say a few words about your faith ...

Paul, I am reminded that when Jesus was baptized in the waters of the Jordan, he heard a voice from heaven that said, “You are my beloved one.” And Paul – and to all of you listening – today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

Paul, on your profession of faith, I now baptize you in the name of the God who created you; the Christ who calls you; and the Spirit who sets you free.