

BAPTISM AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE

Today, we gather to do what Christians do on the Sunday after Epiphany, we gather to remember our baptism through the stories told by our ancestors about the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth. What possible wisdom, comfort or challenges can this story of a baptism that happened in the Jordan River over 2000 years ago offer to us on a day like today? Not much.

Not much, that is, if we choose to remember this story the way the church all too often remembers this story. For centuries the church has adopted a kind of collective amnesia when it comes to baptism. We have chosen to forget the power of this story to inspire resistance to the very systems that continue to prevent us from living in peace.

We have forgotten so very many of the contours of this story that, if remembered, drag us out of our preoccupation with our own selfish needs toward a lifestyle of resistance to what has become the status quo. Where once the story of Jesus Baptism inspired his followers to deny allegiances to the powers that be, in order to take upon themselves a new way of being in the world, generations of amnesia have left us marching in lock step to the drumbeat of violence even as we claim allegiance to the Prince of Peace.

So, what have we 21st century “would be” followers of Jesus, forgotten about this story of Jesus baptism in the first century? Well, to begin with, we have forgotten that our first century ancestors risked everything when they chose to be baptized. Jesus’ contemporaries lived under the oppression of not one but two domination systems. Under the domination of what was the mightiest Empire the world had ever seen, first century people living in Palestine where they were a Jew or a Gentile were required on pain of death to swear allegiance to Rome. The act of swearing allegiance was called in Latin a “sacramentum” – that’s right, our word sacrament comes from the word sacramentum which means “to vow” or to “swear an oath” or “to pledge allegiance.”

My how things have changed. Today, in the church, a sacrament is a rite which is celebrated as a sort of thin place where the holy, the sacred, meets the ordinary. In the United Methodist Church, a sacrament is defined as a rite which includes both the holy and the ordinary. Two things are necessary: the ordinary stuff of the earth, the visible means, and second the command of Jesus to “do this.” In our tradition, we have only two rites that rise to this, one is baptism and the other is communion.

Baptism – water, the ordinary stuff and the command of Jesus who said, “Go therefore, and baptize in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sustainer. And Communion, bread and juice are the visible means and Jesus’ words “do this in remembrance of me.” Our tradition’s celebration of both of these sacraments have radically changed over the centuries. Both have tended to focus upon the experience of individuals rather than the impact upon the community or communities in which those sacraments were celebrated.

These days, baptism has become little more than a nice rite of passage, with precious little power to transform the life of its participants. But in the first century this “sacramentum” of baptism was enough to bring a death sentence down upon the heads of all those who partook of the waters of baptism. The act of baptism was an act of resistance.

Resistance to the Empire of Roman and resistance to the powers of the Temple that collaborated with their Roman over-lords. Every person living under the Pax Romana was under no illusion that pledging allegiance to anyone other than Caesar was an act of sedition punishable by death. For as far as the powers that be were concerned Caesar is Lord.

Caesar was not a name but a title. We would say King, but not a king like we think of kings, but rather a king who is the ultimate authority on Earth and Rome’s ultimate authority. Everyone living under Roman domination was required to “Sacramentum” to pledge allegiance to take an oath proclaiming that Caesar is Lord. Caesar is the ultimate authority. Jewish inhabitants of the Roman Empire were given no choice but to pledge allegiance or to die. Thousands chose death and the Romans crucified them; actually crucified them.

The rotting corpses of the thousands of Jews and Gentiles who refused to proclaim Caesar as Lord created the kind of stink intended to terrorize the oppressed into submission. And most of them did submit.

Even the purveyors of power who walked the hallways to the sacred Temple were dominated in ways that co-opted them into a system that held the whole Pax Romana together.

But every domination system has its resisters. Take John the Baptist for example. John was the son of the temple priest Zachariah. As a temple priest, Zachariah would have collaborated with the Romans. He was a respectable member of the established order. His son John, abandoned the temple, rejected the establishment and went down by the River Jordan, the very river his ancestors had crossed over from slavery into the promise of freedom, and down by the riverside, John conducted very public sacramentums. John’s fame spread far and wide as a notorious resister. John became the Baptist, and Jesus joined the resistance.

Down into the water Jesus went in an act of resistance which in and of itself denied the authority of Caesar and the Empire of Rome and proclaimed allegiance to a new kind of empire, which we often translate as the kingdom of God, but which is more accurately translated as “authority of divinity” or kin-dom of Love. Because if Jesus taught us anything, Jesus taught us that God is love and the authority which Jesus pledged his allegiance to was the authority of Love, an authority which is all about relationships.

That's why we say the "kin-dom". The word "kin" means related. The kin-dom of the Ultimate Authority is the Kin-dom of Love. A place where it is all about the quality of relationship of one to another and relationship to the one who is beyond us.

That's why for three centuries the followers of Jesus of Nazareth's way of being in the world would risk everything to go down to the river and wash themselves clean of their bondage to the Empire which felt like death to them and rise up out of the waters of life like newborn citizens of the kin-dom of love.

They were no longer bound to the ways of the empire, the ways of violence and death, but free to pursue the love which is the ultimate authority, the love that is God.

Baptism was for three centuries the ultimate act of resistance to the powers that be. And then, it was not. Somewhere around the year 313, there was different Caesar sitting upon the throne of Rome, a Caesar who went by the name of Constantine. The powers of Rome were fading out and Caesar Constantine was looking for a way to unite his Empire, and somehow, the fledgling movement known as the Followers of the Way, or the Followers of Christ, fit the bill. Over the course of a few decades Christianity went from an outlawed religion to the new religion of the Empire.

They say power corrupts and indeed power did corrupt Christianity. Where once Christians pledged allegiance to Jesus' way of being and lived as non-violence, when it became the official religion of Rome, Christians felt free to join the military and the rest as they say is history.

So what can the story of Jesus' baptism offer to us; we who stand in the ruins of the fragile peace of the empire, we who daily pledge our allegiance to systems of domination that ensure the authority of the almighty dollar, we who struggle to be kin to one another, we who seek to know the one who is the ultimate authority?

On this day when we remember the baptism of Jesus, maybe we can also remember our own baptism and for those who have yet to be baptized, maybe together we can anticipate a new way of understanding baptism, which isn't really new at all. Maybe we can celebrate baptism as an act of resistance.

In a few minutes we are going to participate in the Reaffirmation of Baptism and we will dip into our water and engage in some holy splashing.

When you touch the water, remember that baptism is an act of resistance. Think about the many ways in which your lives have been co-opted by the powers that be. Think about who or what is your Ultimate Authority?

Do you belong to the empire?

Do you pledge allegiance to wealth and power?

Do you march in lock step with systems that dominate through violence?

Do you limit your kin to those who serve your selfish needs?

Or can you take the dangerous step of actually feeling the waters of life touch you?

Dare you resist?

Dare you pledge your allegiance to the Ultimate Authority that is Love?

Dare you resist by proclaiming that Love is the Ultimate Authority?

Do you have the courage to remember or anticipate your baptism as an act of resistance? an act, once taken that will require the kind of kinship that empowers love to be the ultimate authority?

Do you have the courage to follow Jesus' way of being in the world? I know that kind of resistance is scary. That kind of resistance as some would say might scare the be-Jesus out of you! The good news is that this kind of resistance doesn't depend on me or on you.

Baptism was never meant as an individual sacrament. When we rise up out of the waters of life, we rise up into a community of believers whose ultimate authority is love, the kingdom of love. When our ultimate authority is love, then compassion is our guide as we seek justice for every oppressed or marginalized person, understanding that justice is what love looks like in the world.

We follow Jesus and we need to try to love as he would have us love and that is to follow a call of resistance. I think that is what we are called to do. I think that is what Central United Methodist Church has in its DNA. Resistance to the powers that be. And that resistance can look like visiting the sick and shut ins, welcoming the stranger, bringing cookies to coffee hour, marching for Black Lives Matter, Writing letters to elected officials, working to stop Climate change, offering our building up to the transgender community. Central has been in the forefront of resistance for over 200 years and we still resist. We still house an undocumented immigrant in our church because of cruel policies by the evil president. We resisted and we still resist!

We will continue to resist by drawing upon the spiritual power given to us by Jesus, who demanded justice, who stood up to bullies, who called the most vulnerable the most blessed. We will follow Jesus, the loving resister, who called for the deep repentance that precedes reconciliation rather than an easy grace that leads to nothing. The cuts already go deep and the knives are still being sharpened as we speak. We will resist in Jesus' name and we will resist using the power of love.

We will resist against the hate, but we will not hate. We will resist against the violence but we will not be violent. We will resist against the bitterness and despair by building loving communities and practicing the spiritual discipline of non-violence taught by Martin Luther King, Jr.

When our ultimate authority is love everyone is our kin and peace is achieved not through violence, selfishness or greed but through justice for all of us. Our fight does not end on January 20th. Centuries of systemic racism will not disappear when Joe Biden is sworn in as our next president. White Privilege was on full display as domestic white terrorists stormed our capitol and no one touched them. They were willing to trash offices and were allowed to walk, I would say, saunter out unscathed. As Joy Reid stated, if they were black, they would have been shackled, arrested, or shot dead. The cult of Trumpism will not evaporate somewhere never to be heard from again. God still has work for us to do.

The empire we serve is the kin-dom of love. so together let us sacramentum – pledge our allegiance to Love. Let us rise willing to resist the powers that be and for the sake of kinship.

Let it be so among us.

4 years ago I stood before you as an angry preacher knowing that the next four years would be difficult. I had no idea then, how hard it would really be.

I read a poem then, that I want to read now because I believe it is still true. It is called “Weavers Everywhere.” by M. Rienstra

God sits weeping.

The beautiful creation tapestry she wove with such joy
is mutilated, torn into shreds, reduced to rags,
its beauty fragmented by force.

God sits weeping. But look!

She is gathering up the shreds to weave something new.
She gathers the rags of hard work,
attempts at advocacy, initiatives for peace,
protests against injustice,
all the seemingly little and weak
words and deeds offered
sacrificially
in hope, in faith, in love.

And look! She is weaving them all with golden threads of jubilation into a new tapestry.
A creation richer, more beautiful than the old one was!

God sits weaving
patiently, persistently,
with a smile that
radiates like a rainbow
on her tear-streaked face
and she invites us

not only to keep offering her the
shreds and rags of our suffering
and our work
but even more – to take our place beside her at the Jubilee,
Look and weave with her.
The tapestry of the new creation.

Let us empower one another to resist.
Let us proclaim that Love is the ultimate authority.
Let it be so! amen!