



“Launched”
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
January 9, 2011
Matthew 3:13-17

Some of you remember our 2009 Distinguished Speaker, Tom Troeger, who teaches at Yale Divinity School. Once I heard him describe a game he played in grade school. You may know this game. Half of the children formed a circle with everyone facing outward and holding hands. The other half of the children were outside the circle. The ones in the circle would chant, “You’re out! You’re out! You can’t come in. You’re out! You’re out! You can’t come in.” And once they had chanted this twice, the children who were on the outside would rush as hard as they could to try to break into the circle. The ones in the circle could only hold hands; they could not lock arms. And the ones who were trying to break in just had one chance at it, they could not keep pushing.

Tom pointed out that this is not simply a childhood game. Many people play this game throughout their lives. As early as kindergarten, children form cliques; we like getting together with a certain circle of friends. Sometimes we are in the circle and it feels wonderful, but sometimes we find ourselves on the outside of the circle and it feels horrible. In subtle and not so subtle ways, those in the circle say: “You’re out! You’re out! You can’t come in.”

Of course this game does not end in childhood, but continues into adulthood. We find it in the offices where we work, the organizations we join and the communities in which we live.¹ This game is at the basis of discriminatory attitudes based on skin color, income level, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and political views. Circles that exclude are created by fear, by insecurities and by simple snobbery.

Unfortunately, this game made its way into the Bible. The Scriptures reveal that God is the Creator of all that is, and all of us are created in God’s image. It is a deep and common bond we share with all people. However, on some occasions, such as when the Hebrew people were threatened by foreign nations, they would circle the wagons and say, “God is only interested in us. God is not going to be gracious and merciful to anyone else.” You’re out! You’re out! You can’t come in.

The Book of Jonah was written to undermine this exclusionary mindset. The story says that God sent Jonah to the despised enemy of the Hebrew people, the Ninevites. God ordered Jonah to tell the Ninevites they needed to repent. The people repent, God forgives them, and Jonah becomes furious because he does not want God to be merciful to *those* people. Jonah wants God to embrace only *our* people.

That should have settled the matter of inner and outer circles, but since we humans are prone to sin, this exclusionary attitude resurfaced in the New Testament. You remember that Jesus and all of his followers were Jews. All the first Christians were Jewish Christians, and some of them said, “We are the true believers. You must have Jewish ancestry and you have to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, or you’re out.”

As the Apostle Paul struggled with this notion, he came to believe that the teachings of Christ made it apparent that all people were children of God, and thus anyone should be able to become a part of the Christian Church. Resistance came from Peter and some of the other leaders, but eventually they realized that the church was called to throw open its doors to all. In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul wrote those very powerful words which established the inclusive nature of the Christian church. He wrote, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal. 3:28).

Yet, as you and I know, the church has not always lived up to Paul’s vision. At times, when the church only wanted to welcome people who were more or less like the people already in the church, people said, “You’re out! You’re out! You can’t come in.” There was a time when many white congregations refused to accept black members. Some congregations today do not want members who are gay. Some denominations still bar women from becoming ministers.

This exclusionary attitude has been directed not only at Christians who are perceived to be somehow different, but this privileged approach is most often focused on people of other faiths. Many in the inner circle of the church regard baptism as justification for excluding others. They believe that only those who have been baptized will be welcomed into God’s heavenly kingdom. It sounds silly to me, to imagine God posting a sign on the gates of heaven which reads: “Entrance granted only those who have had water tossed on them in the name of the Trinity.” I cannot believe that the God of the universe, whose grace is from everlasting to everlasting, will exclude people who have not been baptized.

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday. Each year on the Sunday following Epiphany, the gospel lectionary reading fast forwards 30 years from the visit of the Magi to the baptism of the adult Jesus. People were leaving their towns and villages and going into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist preach and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. One day John was baptizing a stream of people; suddenly Jesus was standing before him. According to Matthew, John balked. He said to Jesus, “You should be baptizing me.” But Jesus was determined to show his solidarity with the crowd and so he instructed John to baptize him.

It was a mystical moment. Something happened that stretched the bounds of thought and language. God’s Spirit touched Jesus in an extraordinary way. The gospel writer says that it was as if a dove descended from God and landed on Jesus. The dove has since symbolized God’s Spirit.

Did you notice the significance of the baptism occurring at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry? Before he had preached a sermon, before he had healed anyone, before he had shared a parable, Jesus was baptized. His baptism launched his ministry.

Some people treat baptism as if it is a milestone, such as getting a diploma or crossing a finish line. Some parents have their child baptized simply to get their own parents off of their backs. Other parents do it as a way of celebrating the birth of their child. Some feel that it is something they are supposed to do, but cannot articulate why it is necessary. I think it is important to think of our baptism as the beginning of our spiritual journey. In the same way that

Jesus' baptism launched him on his mission, our baptism is intended to launch us on our lifelong spiritual adventure.

Listen to these words from the Book of Isaiah. God says: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him." (Isaiah 42:1). The baptism of Jesus is an echo of this passage. The spirit of God descends on Jesus and God says, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Isaiah was describing a Suffering Servant who would do God's work by focusing on the needs of the people, no matter the cost. It is the same mission that was given to Jesus. He fulfilled his mission by loving and serving others, especially those who were in despair. It is the same mission that Christ calls on us to embrace.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, called on followers of Christ to remember their baptism. Fred Craddock asks, "What does Luther mean? Is he asking people to remember something that happened when they were infants? Or was he trying to shame people into feeling guilty that they have not lived up to their baptismal vows? No. What Luther had in mind was this: Remember your baptism by claiming yourself to be a child of God and by going about God's business of serving other people."²

Our baptism is a visual reminder that each of us is a child of God. Our baptism is a sign of our entrance into the universal Christian church. Our baptism is a reminder that God forgives us. But our baptism is still something much more. It is a call and a challenge to a new way of living – a way of living that is loving toward others, that seeks justice for people who are oppressed and that strives for peace.

I read where a scholar explained that the spread of the gospel in the Greco-Roman world was basically the result of two factors: the Roman Empire's incredible system of roads and the fact that the New Testament was written in koine Greek, which was the language of the common people.³

Those explanations help us understand in part why the Christian faith spread. There was a good transportation system and the language of the faith was easily accessible.

However, there is a more fundamental reason. The followers of Christ lived out their calling and people were attracted by what they saw and felt compelled to join them. They wanted their lives to be as rich as the followers of Christ who knew the secret to a meaningful and purposeful life.

Our baptism launches us on a mission. We are called to be Christ's heart, hands and feet. God is not satisfied with the world as it is, and calls on us to do something about it.

Scholar Brett Younger says, that as a result of our baptism, we "are citizens of an eccentric community where financial success is not the goal, security is not the highest, good and sacrifice is a daily event...(We are called) to tell the truth in a world that lies, to give in a world that takes, to pray in a world that waits to be entertained, to make peace in a world that is constantly fighting, to take chances in a world that worships safety and to serve in a world that wants to be served."⁴

George Bernard Shaw wrote: "This is the true joy of life: being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy." He says, "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."⁵

If you have been baptized, you have been launched on a holy quest with a torch in your hand. You have been given a command, a duty and a privilege. Your mission demands wisdom, courage and determination, but linked together with others and supported by Christ, you can nudge this world closer to what God intends for it to be.

NOTES

1. Thomas Troeger told this story at the Montreat Worship and Music Conference in Montreat, North Carolina, on June 25, 1998.
2. Harry Parker, *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 2010 – January 2011, p. 42.
3. Joanna Adams, “Spiritual Conditions,” January 7, 2001.
4. Brett Younger, *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 2010 – January 2011, p. 46.
5. John Buchanan, “The Spendthriftiness of Love,” October 10, 1999.