

January 12, 2020

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St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Plant City, Florida

First Sunday of the Epiphany
Matthew 3: 13-17

In the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen!

In her book, *The Seeds of Heaven*, author and Episcopal priest, Barbara Brown Taylor, tells the story of a woman who is worshipping in her downtown parish church on a Sunday morning. Her worship that day had been uplifting and spiritually nourishing. She leaves the church feeling fulfilled, comfortable, and ready to face the week ahead. As she is walking down the sidewalk to her car she encounters a man who is doing his best to look through the windows and doors of the church without actually going in. He sees the woman leaving the church, so he stops her and says, 'Ma'am, excuse me, but can you tell me what it is that you believe in that church you've just come from?' The woman is momentarily stunned and taken aback by the question, and her mind goes blank. She finds herself stumbling for words. Finally, the man just turns away and says, 'I'm sorry I bothered you,' and he walks off down the street.

My guess is that many of us have found ourselves in a similar situation at least once or twice.

In that vein, and related to our gospel today, I have often been asked when it comes to Jesus' baptism, 'Why was Jesus baptized? Don't we believe he was sinless.' Good question, and yes, Jesus was sinless, and for that reason alone, did not need to be baptized. As we heard read in our gospel story, like the woman who is taken aback by the stranger's question, John the Baptist also appears to be puzzled, and even flabbergasted, when he is asked by Jesus to baptize him. John says, 'No way! In fact, I need to be baptized by you. Why do you ask me such a thing?' However, as we know, Jesus insisted, so John baptized him.

But, before we get too far ahead of ourselves, let's go back to the story for a moment. Did you hear what Jesus' answer was to John when he initially said no to Jesus' request to baptize him? He said that he wanted to be baptized in order to 'fulfill all righteousness.' I like that. It sounds like a God answer. And I love the language. But, what does that really mean? To fulfill all righteousness is not a phrase you typically hear used in our every day conversations.

Now, I could regale you, or more likely, bore you, with a theological lecture on the multiple permutations of what 'to fulfill with all righteousness' means. Biblical commentaries abound with lengthy explanations. However, the meaning, that I believe covers most of the bases is this - Jesus was baptized as a way of

validating his humanity and oneness with us. He was identifying with us, establishing a basis for the example he would offer us on how to live out our lives. The Hebrew phrase 'to fulfill with all righteousness' comes from two root words, *yaw-lad*, meaning, to bear, beget, deliver, birth, or bring forth; and, *gaw-aw*, which means to increase, be risen, or triumph like the majesty of God. In other words, 'to fulfill all righteousness' is to bring forth, or birth, within us the fulness and completeness of God's triumph in our lives.

Identifying with our humanity, and setting an example for us in daily living, are key understandings in the story of Jesus' baptism. And thanks to Jesus, those examples are all around us.

For instance, some of you may recall a man who lived in the first half of the twentieth century named Albert Schweitzer. Actually, he was better known as Dr. Albert Schweitzer - a medical doctor. Schweitzer also had a degree in theology, and was a world famous organist. Born with the same giving and servant spirit we associate with Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Albert Schweitzer spent most of his life in a place called Lamborene, a remote area in the country of Gabon in west central Africa. During his many years of ministry in that country he was able to build a hospital and laboratory, ministering to both the physical and spiritual needs of the poor people who lived in that area. He rarely traveled, but when he did, he spent some time in the United States, raising money for his work with the sick and the poor of Africa - giving theological lectures and organ concerts. As a missionary, as a speaker, and as a musician, Schweitzer was very much in demand. During his life, he turned down numerous offers to do different things, feeling a deep calling to remain where he was. Schweitzer died in the early 1960's and is buried in a cemetery next to his beloved hospital and the people he loved and cared for.

One of the most memorable statements attributed to Schweitzer during his life was, 'Example is not the main thing in life - it is the only thing.'

My brothers and sisters, there is no question that the examples we see and imitate in life have a powerful and profound influence on us. Jesus' baptism is an exclamation point on that message.

Schweitzer's comment on the power of example reminds me of a seminary story about a student who preached his first sermon in class while standing in what seemed to be an awkward position. While he was preaching he held one shoulder higher than the other. The sermon was excellent. After the class his professor asked him about his unusual stance while preaching. The student confessed that he wasn't even aware of it. As they talked further about it, the student realized that he had come from a congregation where his pastor had been crippled early in his life as the result of an automobile accident and physically had to assume an awkward position with his shoulder when he preached. The young man had admired his pastor so much that he unconsciously imitated his pastor's awkward posture when he preached. In that story we see the power of a subjective, yet positive example.

Closer to home, I'm also reminded of a conversation I had with one of my clients while working with the Child Abuse Council in Tampa back in the early 90's. One of our mothers confessed to me that she had come to hate herself because she constantly yelled at her children. She said, 'That is what my mother did to me. And I made a vow that when I became a mother, I would never do that. However, I now find myself doing the same thing and I hate myself for it!' Again, we see the power an example can have on our lives. In this case, a negative one.

My friends, we are continuously confronted with examples for daily living, that are both positive and negative. That's why many of us are so concerned about the role models our children and grandchildren choose - because we know that those examples are going to impact the way they pattern their lives. (Jule and Dan, I know that one of the reasons that you are here this morning is your desire to provide Emerson with a Christian role model for her life.) Yet, the truth is, not everyone embraces that understanding in the same way.

A former NBA basketball player and sports commentator named Charles Barkley once said, 'I'm not a role model for your children. That's the parent's job.' And while what he says has a significant truth attached to it, we also know that young people are still attracted to athletic superstars, the latest singing sensation or movie star.

One of my personal favorites is now retired NFL football player Peyton Manning. And why do I say that? Because from everything I've read about him, and listened to from those who know him, he is a devoted family man, has high moral standards and a strong work ethic. Over the course of his successful career, and in his day-to-day life he seems to have set a good example for not only children, but adults.

However, I don't have to look to history, or to the sports world, or the world of entertainment for examples of good role models. As I interact with this congregation on a daily basis, and on Sunday mornings, I see you working hard to 'fulfill all righteousness,' to be the positive examples God created you to be.

During my years as a Deacon and Priest I have often reminded parents of the power of their own example and the importance of being faithful in their attendance in worship and of their participation in the ministries of the Church. Those are baptismal promises we make, and a responsibility we are reminded of this morning. In that regard, my own mother was the dominant example for me. For a young child, even though they may be restless at times, the power of Mom and Dad's example as they participate in worshipping God is a lesson that no Sunday School teacher, or pastor, can teach as effectively. Our examples are powerful tools in working out God's purposes for God's people.

I recall a religious survey taken some years ago by the Gallup company. The survey summarized participant's opinions on the power of people's example. The results showed that (1) If mom and dad both attended worship faithfully, 72 percent of their children remained faithful in their adult life. (2) If only dad attended faithfully, 55 percent of their children remained faithful. (3) If only mom

attended faithfully, only 15 percent of their children stayed faithful. (4) And, if neither parent attended worship faithfully, or they sent their kids to Sunday School with someone else, the percentage of children who attended church when they became adults dropped to six percent.

Compare those statistics to a recent survey by the PEW Research organization that highlighted nine significant changes in American society over the last decade. One of those changes focused on our religious life. It used to be that a majority of Americans would show up in church at least once or twice a month. In the last ten years it has become more common for us to attend church only a few times a year, or less, roughly (54%) - compared to those who attend monthly, or more, about (45%). And that's just one measure by which the religious landscape of the country has changed. Since 2009, the share of Americans who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular," has grown from 17% to 26%; while those who describe themselves as Christians has declined from 77% to 65%.

The decline in the numbers of those who attend church on a regular basis, raises significant questions for all who claim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Who provides the pre-eminent example for us in determining how we are to live our lives? To whom do we owe our ultimate allegiance for the gift of life itself?

My brothers and sisters, from time-to-time people have said to me that they have no need to come to church and worship, and that they have a good, strong, personal relationship with God. While I certainly don't disagree with what they say, and am encouraged by the strength of their relationship with God, I do believe they underestimate the example they convey to their unchurched friends and neighbors - a critical responsibility we agree to at our baptism. At the heart of our Sunday morning worship experience is our understanding of where we find the examples for how we want to live our lives. There are some who may not think so, but unchurched neighbors notice when Christians repeatedly skip an example for regular worship that our Savior repeatedly modeled for us in Holy Scripture. It may be subjective, but it is the unchurched neighbor's way of assessing whether or not your professed faith in the Lord is disingenuous or for real. I believe it would be a fair statement to say that sometimes our actions speak so loudly that people find it difficult to hear what we're saying.

Albert Schweitzer said that 'Example is not the main thing in life - it is the only thing.' This morning our gospel story reminds us of the power of Jesus' example. That in his fulfilling of righteousness - through his baptism - and through his life and ministry, we are inspired to 'walk the talk' of our Christian faith. My friends, remember your baptismal vows. And this morning let us all recommit ourselves to following Jesus' example. Amen.

