

Only the Beginning

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Matthew 3:13-17

Seminary professor, Rodger Nishioka, shares this story: “Kyle was nowhere to be found, and I missed him. In the weeks following his baptism and confirmation on Pentecost Sunday, he was noticeably missing. Kyle and his family had come to the congregation when he was in the fifth grade. They attended sporadically, so I was more than a little surprised when he and his parents said he was interested in joining the confirmation class. They all came for an orientation meeting and agreed to the covenant to participate in two retreats, a mission activity, work with a mentor, and weekly classes for study and exploration. He was serious in attending and rarely missed a class or event. He quickly became a significant part of the group and developed some wonderful friendships. Since Kyle had not yet been baptized, he was not only confirmed but also baptized on Pentecost Sunday. It was a marvelous celebration.

“That is pretty much where it ended. That is when I knew we had done something wrong. When I checked in with Kyle and his folks, they all seemed a little surprised that I was calling and checking up on them. I distinctly remember his mother saying, ‘Oh, I guess we thought Kyle was all done. I mean, he was baptized and confirmed and everything. Isn’t he done?’ That’s the problem. Despite our best intentions and despite all that we say and try to communicate, too many people seem to think that the baptism of an infant or young adult or adult is the culminating activity of faith, that then we are ‘all done’. But Matthew’s description of Jesus’ baptism tells us the opposite. In Matthew’s text, the baptism of Jesus is not the ending of his ministry. Baptism is the beginning of his ministry. It is the launching of the public ministry for which he was created and to which he was called – the beginning of a remarkable journey.” Baptism as beginning...

I am reminded of some words spoken by a pastor to a tiny baby on the day of her baptism. No doubt he was speaking to the congregation as much as to the infant when he said, “Little sister, by this act of baptism, we welcome you to a journey that will take your whole life. This isn’t the end. It’s the beginning of God’s experiment with your life. What God will make of you, we know not. Where God will take you, surprise you, we cannot say. This we do know and this we do say...God is with you.” Baptism as beginning...

One of the best illustrations of the power of baptism as a new beginning, as transformation, I have ever seen was not in church, but in a film – *Shawshank Redemption*. Many of you may recall it. Based on a Stephen King story, it tells the story of a man, Andy, played by Tim Robbins, who is serving a life sentence for a murder he did not commit. Even though prison life is brutal and he receives severe beatings, Andy does not give up - always standing up for justice, helping his fellow inmates, embodying hope in even his seemingly hopeless circumstance.

And then we learn why. He has an escape plan he has worked on for twenty years. And one stormy night he puts his plan into action.

(at this point, the film clip of Andy’s escape from prison was played)

Every time I view that scene I think of baptism. Andy had just crawled through unimaginable muck and filth. He had lived through cruel and vicious years in prison. But now, in the water, washed clean by rain, he sheds his old clothes, sheds his old self. He is literally born again. It’s as if heaven and earth come together and proclaim, “You are free now – free from false accusation, free from hypocrisy, free from bondage, free from your past, free to begin again.” Yes, only the beginning. It seems like God is never finished shaping and re-shaping us. Any day can be a day when God chooses to move into our lives, and any place can be a place where heaven touches earth and we are forever changed. And it is in baptism that God meets us, embraces us, comes to us, renews us and commissions us to be about God’s work. All of our baptisms take their meaning from Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan. And once God has us in baptism, God is not willing to let us go.

A story shared by a pastor: “A few summers ago, a boy in our church returned home from his first year in college. He appeared at my office to tell me that I would not be seeing him in church while he was home over the summer. When I asked why, he told me, ‘Well, you see I have been

doing a lot of thinking about religion while I was at college, and I have come to the conclusion that there is not much to this religion thing. I have found out that I don't need the church to get by.'

"I responded that I found all that very interesting.

" 'Aren't you worried?' he asked. 'I thought you would go through the roof when I told you this.'

"I had known the boy for about five years, had baptized him a couple of years ago and watched him grow during his high school years. He came from a very difficult family situation. The church had watched over him, had a hand in making it possible for him to go to college. 'No, I'm interested in what you had to say, but not overly concerned. I'll be watching to see if you can pull it off,' I told him.

"He asked, 'What do you mean – pull it off? I don't understand. I'm nineteen. I can decide to do anything I want to do.'

" 'I'm just saying that I'm not so sure you will be able to get away with this. After all, you are baptized.'

" 'So what does that have to do with anything? What does being baptized have to do with me?'

" 'Well, for one thing, there are people here in the church who care about you. They made promises to God when you were baptized. You try not showing up around here this summer and they will be nosing around, asking you what you are doing with your life, what kind of grades you made last semester. Then there's also God. No telling what God might try with you. From what I've seen, once God has claimed you, you don't get off the hook so easily. God is relentless in claiming what is his. And, in baptism, God says you belong to him.'

"The boy shook his head in wonder at this strange, unreasonable brand of reasoning and more or less stumbled out of the door of my study. But in a week or so he was back at his place in the second pew."

Now I am aware that we are all busy people. So for me to stand here and say that every baptized Christian is called into God's service and that God is just not going to let us go, may not sound all that appealing. Great...one more job to do, more responsibility when I am already staggering under loads that are way too heavy. No wonder people go the other way when they see me coming. What is Gene going to ask me to do now! One woman, after listening to a sermon on the importance of the ministry of the laity, told her pastor, "I'm sorry, but I don't want to be that important."

Says Barbara Brown Taylor, "Like many of those who sit beside her in church, she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to do more - to lead the stewardship campaign, or cook supper for the homeless, or teach Sunday school. Or she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to be more – to be more generous, more loving, more religious. No one has ever introduced her to the idea that her ministry might involve being just who she already is and doing just what she already does, with one difference: namely, that she understands herself to be God's person in and for the world.

Only the beginning...our lives matter, have significance, not because we are self-centered, autonomous, self-made beings who need only look out for ourselves because, ultimately, the most important project in my life is me. That is the message of our modern, scientific, secular, market driven world. But it is not the countercultural message of baptism or the church. No here, we dare to teach that our lives matter, have significance, because we have been called, claimed, commandeered by the Creator of heaven and earth who never seems to run out of meaningful ways to use us. And the hope is that as a worshipping community, we will continue to grow in our understanding of what God is calling us to be and do as we live out our baptismal identity as beloved and precious children of God.

A woman, quietly listening to the discussion during a Bible study at her church, finally spoke up. "Well. most of this is beyond my comprehension. I'm a rather simple disciple. I don't know a lot of theology. I don't comprehend much of the Bible. So I just try to be as faithful a follower of Jesus as I can be, where I am, in my own little way." It seems to me that she got Christian baptism and faith just about right.