

December 6, 2020

We've started a new church year... Last year our gospel readings were primarily from Matthew, this year they will be from Mark.

Our reading for today is the absolute beginning of Mark, and it starts with a bang, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." In this season of Advent, we are waiting and watching for the presence of Christ.

Our gospel reading introduces John the Baptist, and he points directly to Jesus as the one who is coming into the world, the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit... Today I'd like to do some reflecting on Baptism.

Baptism itself is the language of change and transformation. The origin of the word Baptism has its roots in washing rituals. In other words, the transformation is from being unclean to being made clean. Like washing the dishes, they go from dirty to clean.

We often think of Baptism as an event, and it certainly is a cherished sacrament. It is God reaching down and choosing us, claiming us as His children. It demonstrates the power of God to love us, even and especially when we are dead in sin.

Baptism is also a way of life. As we remember our Baptism, we rise every day as a new creation. A fully forgiven and beloved child of God, and so we live into the

freedom to love God and love our neighbor. Instead of being turned in on ourselves, we're focused outward...

As you remember from confirmation days, the Father creates, the Son redeems, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies. The baptism that Jesus brings, is all about sanctification and this process of change, this transformation.

And frankly, this is where Christianity matters... This is where the rubber hits the road in our everyday and very real lives...

As we live into our baptism, change happens... Paul tells us in Galatians that the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. When I see these things, I see the Spirit's work within us.

Couple stories this morning... When I was doing my chaplaincy training, I often started the day at shift change with the nurses. It was an orthopedic unit... They would meet and talk about the various patients and care plans.

One day I was asked to visit a young man who had been in an accident. The accident was the result of his drunk driving, and he was also diabetic and overweight and angry. The nurses said he was impossible to deal with!

So, I entered his room and introduced myself. He pretty much dismissed me as a waste of time. But said I could stay if I wished... He then started barking at me,

about the nurses, about the food, about the Doctors, nothing was right as far as he was concerned.

And as the nurses would enter the room, he would do a running commentary on their physical appearance... It was awful, like I entered hell itself...

The nurses were all amazing professions, they took a lot of abuse, and they did not return evil for evil. They were right, he was impossible to deal with...

I tried to have a conversation with him about anything... sports... He was Vikings fan, but as far as he was concerned, the Vikings were the worst team in football... For this guy, absolutely everything was bad and going to heck. I'll be honest, I gave it my best shot, but I was glad to get out of there! I don't think I made one iota of difference. But here's the thing-- you never know...

When I think about that visit, I'm reminded of a phrase that a great theologian once said, "If you don't transform your pain, you will most certainly transmit it." That guy was transmitting pain all over the place!

Another story... I keep a photo in my bible of me and a friend, I'll call him John. The picture was taken just a couple days before he died. John had lived with diabetes almost his entire life; it was diagnosed when he was a teenager. But he never let it define who he was.

He went to college, got married, had a family... He was always about finding the silver lining. John was a participant in a bible study I did every Monday morning. He had such wisdom...

The thing that I loved about John, was that he was always measuring what he was going to say. He would wait on his words, and respond in ways that were always loving, kind and gracious. The content of his character, was a description of the fruits of the spirit-- the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness...

As we live into our baptism, into that love and forgiveness, the Holy Spirit washes us in reflection. The Holy Spirit is a mirror that reveals us to ourselves. It brings self-awareness. When we notice the presence of God observing and praying for us, we live in the direction of being like Jesus, being loving, kind and gracious...

It's transformative... It fundamentally changes who we are in relation to one another. And the good news is that this what God does for us. This is what it means to be baptized by the Holy Spirit. I invite you to think for a few moments, do you know someone who is like my friend John-- loving, kind and gracious?

Of course, our congregation is full of people just like John...

During this Advent season, as we wait and watch for the presence of Jesus, lets also be watchful for the love, kindness, and graciousness that's all around us.

It is a sign of the Kingdom of God. Christmas is coming... Emmanuel is coming... And they will know we are Christians by our love... Amen.