

Homily – Connected By the Spirit

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Here In California we often have the opportunity to live amongst the redwood trees. We know these huge trees can grow to amazing heights. But we often don't realize that the roots that anchor the tree into the earth only go down about five or ten feet. The way that these enormous trees survive is by interlocking their roots with other redwoods so that in the wind they hold each other in place. These trees were created to be connected to one another. And, so were we. The great French philosopher Simone Weil wrote, "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognize need of the human soul." The redwoods help remind us just why that is.

Now, today we have our annual celebration of the baptism of Jesus. Our Gospel reading that we heard is Luke's version of this baptism. Jesus was baptized by water in the River Jordan and *"the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* You can see a picture of this over there in the stained glass window. The Holy Spirit, as represented by the dove, descends on Jesus with the baptism by water in the River Jordan.

In our tradition, but not in all traditions, the baptism by the water and Spirit is at the same time. When I baptize a baby or an adult, I put holy water on the head three times, and then put the sign of the Cross on the forehead with Chrism oil. In our tradition, one receives both the water of baptism and the oil of the Holy Spirit.

In other traditions, water baptism and receiving of the Holy Spirit are separate occasions, that may even be years apart. In these other traditions Confirmation has become the Sacrament or ceremony in which the Holy Spirit is finally conferred on a person, but again, in our tradition it all happens with baptism.

It is hard to know whether one belief about baptism is better than another, and this is all muddied a bit by the reading that we heard from the Book of Acts. "When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit."

This passage shows that water baptism and Spirit baptism are separated and done by different people. This seems to contradict our tradition and practice, but here is the way we rationalize this passage with our tradition.

For some people the Spirit is received at the time of water baptism. Whether a person is baptized as a baby or as an adult, for some people the Holy Spirit is received at baptism. For others, there may be a delay in the receiving of the Spirit, and for even others, the Spirit may be received before water baptism.

Our Bible recognizes diversity in the ways that God enters into people's lives and recognizes the different paths that a person may be on in their spiritual journey. So, while it may be common for the Spirit to be received at baptism, it is not uncommon for the Spirit to be received at a different time. This seems to be a neat and tidy answer, but actually it doesn't answer everything. For example, this neat and tidy answer doesn't tell us why we continue to have a Sacrament of Confirmation. Why do we need or still have Confirmation if we already have the Holy Spirit through baptism?

This year, on the second Sunday of February, our Bishop will come here to St. Barnabas to visit and lead worship. She will also conduct the Sacrament of Confirmation which includes those who have never been confirmed, those who are Received from other apostolic traditions and those who are Reaffirming their baptismal vows.

This Sacrament of Confirmation is appropriate for those who want to make a public statement about where they are in their ongoing journey with God and their journey with our community here at St. Barnabas. Next Sunday we begin a three-week series of classes to prepare people for Confirmation and to help people understand if they want to be confirmed. The first class is a broad survey about theology, the second class is about spiritual practices that help draw us closer to God, and the third class is about all things Episcopalian. Many of you here today have taken these or similar classes in the past and have been Confirmed by a bishop here at St. Barnabas. If you haven't, then you should consider whether this is the year to get Confirmed. Let me know if you want to know about Confirmation or about being Received or about Reaffirming your Baptism. Is the Holy Spirit calling to you?

Now, one final word about today's Gospel reading. Recall that we heard, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." This passage has been seen by some to mean that the wheat or good people will be gathered by Jesus into heaven, and the chaff or bad people will burn in hell. Or put another way, the baptized people are saved and the unbaptized people are damned. This interpretation does not fit with my understand of our God of the universe. It doesn't fit with love, grace, and mercy. Remember that Christ, the second part of the Trinity, is in all things and around all. Christ in all people, whether they are baptized or not.

And, because Christ is in all and around all, it means we are all connected. The False Self that we all have, our egos, needs to see ourselves as better than others. The False Self contracts, and separates. But, the True Self, the part of us that is of Christ, sees no need to be better than others. The True Self expands and connects. The True Self already knows that it is the beloved of God. You don't have to earn God's love, you already have it. You can't do anything to achieve a greater portion of God's love because God's love for you is already unconditional, and it is already infinite. And, baptism does not make God love you more. However, Baptism and Confirmation are both public statements that you are going to nurture your True Self. You are going to water the seed within you so that it grows and expands and starts to crowd out the False Self.

With our baptism we acknowledge the reason that God created us. We were created to love lavishly and indiscriminately because we have been loved lavishly and indiscriminately. We can be gracious because we are grateful. We can love because we have been loved. With our baptism we feel deep within our hearts and with every cell of our being that we are held in embrace by God who made us, the God who redeemed us, and the God who accompanies us through every end and onward to every beginning.

So, let me give you another interpretation of this wheat and chaff passage, an interpretation that is consistent with the undoubtable fact that we are all connected by Christ. Instead of good and bad people who have divergent destinations, we know that each of us has a good part and a bad part. We each have beauty and ugliness. We each have a True Self and a False Self. In God's Kingdom, Christ gathers all of us and the good parts are kept and the bad parts of self are let go. All of us are rooted in this connection to one another, and all of us have the same destiny of awe and wonder.

I want to end today with a prayer of connection. If you are here in person, you received a gold star when you arrived this morning. This past Thursday we started our annual season of Epiphany as we celebrate the light that has come into the world. And, each of your gold stars has a prayer and a word. Each of you has a different word in the box on your star. That is your word for 2022. It is a word for you to reflect on that might reveal something in your life. When I randomly selected a star for myself, my word was "teaching." And, each star also has a prayer for 2022. The prayer is the same on each star. It is a prayer of connection. If you are with us online you will see this prayer on your screen. And, if you are with us online, and you would like your own word for 2022, then email me and I will send you a word. As we end this time of teaching let us say this prayer of connection together.

God, Lord of all creation, lover of life and of everything, please help us to love in our very small way what You love infinitely and everywhere. We thank You that we can

offer just this one prayer and that will be more than enough, because in reality every thing and every one is connected, and nothing stands alone. To pray for one part is really to pray for the whole, and so we do. Help us each day to stand for love, for healing, for the good, for the diverse unity of the Body of Christ and all creation, because we know this is what You desire: as Jesus prayed, that all may be one. We offer our prayer together with all the holy names of God, we offer our prayer together with Christ, our Lord. Amen.