

Today is the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ. Every year we read about Jesus being baptized in the Jordan by John the Baptizer. And usually, I preach about Jesus' baptism.

But today, I want to focus on what baptism means to us. And though I originally drafted this sermon before the events of this week, I do want talk about our calling as baptized Christians in our current national context.

And I want to come at this from an unlikely direction. I want to deal with our Epistle lesson from Acts ch19.

Now this is a rather unusual little story. In fact, it gets misused as a proof-text by some Pentecostal Christians. But if we look carefully, it puts a number of things into perspective.

In Acts 19, Luke writes, "While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples."

At first, that seems rather cut and dried. But there are just a couple of literary tricks Luke is playing on us. First, he mentions Apollos, who was originally a follower of John the Baptist. Apollos later converted to Christianity and became a Christian missionary. This is a subtle hint about things to come.

Also Luke writes that Paul found "some disciples." At first, we might assume that these are Christian disciples. That apparently was Paul's initial impression as well, that these disciples are Christians.

But in scripture, Jesus' disciples are always called HIS disciples or THE disciples. They're never SOME disciples. Acts 19:1 is the only time that term is used in the entire New Testament: "some" disciples. It's a vague description. Everywhere else in the New Testament, the word "disciples" is always qualified: disciples of Jesus, disciples of John the Baptist, disciples of the Pharisees, etc.

So "some disciples" is a rather mysterious, open ended description. This is a BIG clue that something strange is going on.

Early on, Paul senses that there's something strange about these disciples. So he asks, point blank,

"Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?"

They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

Now that's a major clue that these are not a group of Christians. If you haven't even heard of the Holy Spirit, then there's something vital missing. So Paul continues,

"Into what then were you baptized?"

They answered, "Into John's baptism."

Aha. These are disciples of John the Baptist. If they know anything about Jesus Christ, it's very superficial.

So Paul speaks about John the Baptist. He says,
"John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus."

At a fairly superficial level there is a key distinction between John's baptism and Christian baptism. John's baptism is simply a baptism of repentance. It's a baptism of wanting to make a change of direction.

Repentance is a good first step. Realizing that you are going in the wrong direction is an important first step towards spiritual maturity. But that's not the end of the journey.

That's what makes John's baptism incomplete in and of itself. John's baptism involved turning away from sin and repenting. But there was no turning towards. There was no embracing of another path. There was no acceptance of a new way. John certainly pointed to that new way. John pointed to Jesus. But not all who were baptized by John ended up following Jesus.

This is an important reality about baptism that we often miss. It's not just turning away from something. It's turning towards something else. It's not about being generic disciples, "some disciples."

It's about being disciples of Jesus Christ.

After all, in our baptismal service, we ask 6 questions of those coming to be baptized.

The first 3 questions begin with the words, "Do you renounce...?"

This part is about repenting and renouncing evil. There are 3 questions:

"Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?"

"Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?"

"Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?"

You may remember the classic movie *The Godfather*. It is at this point in the baptismal service that mob-boss Michael Corleone says he renounces evil. And yet the camera cuts back and forth between the new Godfather renouncing evil, and scenes of his henchmen killing off all of his enemies. Cinematic irony at its best.

One hopes that we're a bit more sincere about renouncing and turning away from evil. But Christian baptism is about more than renouncing. It's also about embracing something.

So Christian baptism begins with repentance. But it doesn't stop there. There are 3 more questions.

The first 3 questions are about turning away from. The last 3 questions are about turning towards. And they're not generic questions about becoming "some disciples", generic disciples. They are about following someone in particular.

First: "Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?"

Second: "Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?"

Third: "Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?"

These are important questions. The Christian path is not some vague, vanilla, generic spirituality. No. Christianity is about following Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Jesus doesn't just proclaim some fuzzy generic well-meaning philosophy of trying to be more spiritual.

Jesus asks us to do concrete things, specific things, often difficult things.

Jesus asks us to love God totally, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus asks us to love our enemies and those who wish us harm.

Jesus asks us to love in ways that involve self-sacrifice.

Jesus asks us to take up our own crosses and follow him, dying to ourselves and our selfish ways, and living in the light of his resurrection.

The events of this past week show how desperately our world needs true followers of Jesus Christ. Our divided nation needs citizens who will reach out in love across the barriers that separate us. We desperately need people who will love others sacrificially, in spite of political disagreements, in spite of all of the other things that might divide us.

Plus we promise to follow and obey Jesus as Lord. That means that his claim on us is primary. Our identity as his followers, as Christians is primary. If Jesus is our Lord, that means he comes before all of our other loyalties. For Christians, Jesus has to come first, before our country, before our political party or philosophy, before our ethnicity, before anything else that defines or characterizes us.

As the saying goes, "If Jesus is not Lord of all (in our lives), then Jesus is not Lord at all."

In a moment, we will renew our baptismal vows. When you were baptized, you were not making a commitment to just be "some disciples," generic disciples.

No. You promised to turn to Jesus Christ, to put your whole trust in his grace and love. Whole trust. Not 50/50, or 60/40, or 80/20. Your "whole trust."

And you promised to follow and obey him as your Lord. Not as one voice amongst many competing voices. But as the primary voice you listen to, and follow, and obey.

We're not "some disciples." We're Jesus' disciples. And he calls us to love others in the same way that he loves us.

In 2021, our world desperately needs obedient followers of Jesus Christ who will love and serve others in Jesus' name.

May God help us to live and grow more and more into that identity.