

“Fan the Flame”

Isaiah 42:1-9 and Matthew 3:13-17

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In Matthew's gospel a question is answered. Why was Jesus baptized? He and John wrangle about whether or not he should be. Jesus comes all the way from Galilee to the river Jordan to find John so that he can be baptized. This isn't what John expected. John has been telling people that Jesus is coming as the baptizer. The one who will baptize with spirit and with fire. And yet here is Jesus before him submitting to a human baptism. When John says, “Why? Why are you doing this?” Jesus answers, “This is the way for us to fulfill all righteousness” or in other words this is the way for us to be in right relationship with God and with one another.

Being baptized is Jesus first public act in all the gospels. We see it in the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. We hear about it in John. It's also his first act as an adult in all the gospels. Jesus' baptism tells us who he is now that he's grown up and it tells us about the spirit of his ministry. Theologian Emil Bruner says,

In Jesus' baptism, we see what the adult Jesus will be like in the rest of the Gospel. I consider this incident Jesus' first miracle: the miracle of his humility. The first thing Jesus does for the human race is go down with it into the deep waters of repentance and baptism. Jesus' whole life will be like this. It's well known that Jesus ends his ministry on a cross between thieves; it deserves to be as well known that he begins his ministry in a river among sinners. From his baptism to his execution Jesus stays low, at our level, identifying with us at every point, becoming as completely one with us in our humanity as, in the church's teaching, he is believed to be completely one with God in eternity.¹

For Jesus to be in right relationship with us and with God he humbly goes down into the deep waters of repentance through baptism.

Jesus' baptism is in keeping with what God says through Isaiah about God's servant, the one who will come to set things right. The servant is described as one who lives with great humility. Listen to how Eugene Peterson interprets Isaiah in his Message Bible, “He won't call attention to what he does with loud speeches or gaudy parades. He won't brush aside the bruised and the hurt and he won't disregard the small and insignificant, but he'll steadily and firmly set things right.

He won't tire out and quit. He won't be stopped until he's finished his work—to set things right on earth.”

From his humble act we learn who we are: God's beloveds – sinners in need of and receiving grace. And from this humble act we learn how we ought to be in relationship with God and our neighbors – with deep humility. We recognize that we owe everything to God who graciously chooses to be with us in the way of Jesus and while we don't see ourselves as unworthy or less than our neighbors, we never see ourselves as more worthy or better than our neighbors. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection puts us in right relationship with God and our neighbors, that's been done! But we're aware that we don't always live that way, so this posture of humility is how we strive to live into that already but not yet reality.

I'm going to guess that you've heard by now about the closure of the homeless encampment underneath the Mulberry street bridge. If you haven't then you should know that there are currently about 50 to 60 people living in tents underneath the bridge. This past week the city announced plans to close that camp and work with agencies to relocate those who live there. Their reasons for doing so are many. There has been significant crime there, reports of drug trafficking and sex trafficking, EMT's called multiple times to revive people who have overdosed and to tend people who've been assaulted. There have been several arrests, and last year a murder. Sanitation workers refuse to go to the encampment any longer to empty trash bins because there's been so much food dropped off and left rotting on the street, that it's created a rat infestation and sanitation workers are in danger of being bitten. This is the sad reality of what's happening under the Mulberry Street bridge. The city is currently seeking a place to which they can relocate those who want to be relocated. Street outreach workers from Christian Churches United and medical outreach workers from UPMC already have relationships there and continue talking with people about their plans and their needs once the encampment is closed. There's hope among those who work for Harrisburg agencies, that what's happening will ultimately enable new coordinated relationships among those who care for the homeless, and there's hope that the city and agencies will refocus on addressing not just daily needs but the systemic issue of homelessness.

I hope so too. I hope that this closure will shift the conversation from only asking “how do we care for those experiencing homelessness to why are there people experiencing homelessness?” Dale Laninga, chair of our Homelessness Initiative and I participated in a zoom on Friday afternoon with many agencies and faith organizations addressing the closure. We simply listened to see if there is a way that Market Square Church can participate in their efforts. It was a similar zoom, though on a much smaller scale, that led Market Square Church to open a warming shelter on the December weekend when temperatures turned bitterly cold. There will be opportunities for us to volunteer but we don't know what they are yet and we're willing to wait patiently until they become clear.

The problems of homelessness are many and complicated. I believe this is the time for humility and not outrage. This is the time for cooperative servant leadership. Yes, we can ask questions. Yes we can hope for and ask for a better response from those who have power to make changes for those who are homeless, but sudden outrage when confronted with a crisis serves no one, and makes us an unwelcome partner. Now perhaps you're thinking, as I initially thought to myself, “but Jesus threw over the tables in

the temple!” And that’s true, but in that instance, he was trying to bring attention to a problem that no one else was seeing, perhaps even those whom it affected most. With this problem there are plenty of people who see it and who are working on it, and who have more knowledge of it than we do. So humility should characterize our approach.

There’s work to be done and advocacy to be done. If we wish to add our voice to the conversation, we need to be those who are willing to listen. Listen to those who are homeless and to others who work with them. We must be those who are willing to do the difficult work of examining our own lives and the ways we contribute to the systems that create the inequalities that plague our country. We can ask ourselves, have I done the work of understanding the privileges that my race or skin color afford me? The advantages that come with being born into a higher socio-economic status? Do I live with gratitude for the things I have? How protective am I of the things I perceive to be mine? How much do I participate in a NIMBY, not in my backyard, attitude? How angry do I get when things don’t go the way I want them to go? How content am I with my daily life, even when it’s hard? How often do I find myself thinking, why me? We all struggle with these questions and issues but the more we can live with content about our lives, especially those of us who have more resources, the more receptive we’ll be to changes that need to be made to solve not only the problems of homelessness but also many other social issues. When others propose long term solutions, can we be those who stand up at city council meeting and say, “Yes we support this! How can we help?” even if it means changes for us? Might we be those who do the proposing of solutions and work to make them happen? Perhaps, but only if we work cooperatively with people who know more than we do. That takes humility. I hope I’ll have more to share with you in Wednesday’s Beacon Light about how we can help. If you don’t receive that email already and you wish to do so, call the church office and we’ll get you on the list. There is also a meeting via zoom for anyone who wishes to volunteer in the effort to help people move. That’s on Monday and I have a flyer about it.

We’re also ordaining and installing officers today. In the ordination liturgy we proclaim to them, “The grace bestowed on you in baptism is sufficient for your calling.” Part of the grace given to us in baptism is the ability to work at reflecting Christ’s own humble service. An image that stuck out to me from Isaiah’s description of God’s servant is this one, “a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” In my mind I have the image of someone gently, ever so gently coaxing a candle ember into a brightly burning flame. It’s that gentle humble steadiness that I hope for each of us to carry in our hearts as we seek to participate in the work of God’s servant, the one who is given “as a covenant to all people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” Beloveds, justice and righteousness demand that together we fan this flame and that we do it in the way of Christ. Amen.

ⁱ Brunner, Emil. *The Christian Doctrine of God. Dogmatics, Vol 1.* Philadelphia, Westminster. P 101.