

TIME TO RENEW
Mark 1:4-11

Today is the day to remember our baptism and be thankful. It just so happens that Mike advised me this morning that he hasn't been baptized and wanted to know when he could be baptized. What happened was that a couple of weeks ago Mike asked if he could be baptized and I asked him whether or not he had been baptized as an infant. He said he did not have a record of it but would check with his parents. I have heard people say before that they were baptized Lutheran or Methodist or whatever. We are baptized into Christ or as Christians, not into a certain denomination of Christianity. All denominations, with the exception of Baptists who do not believe in infant baptism, honor one baptism regardless of where you were baptized. Well as you can imagine, I was really excited when Mike said he wanted to be baptized because I thought today would be the perfect day since our gospel reading was the baptism of our Lord. Now in the Methodist tradition we offer three ways of baptizing: sprinkling, pouring and immersion. Which way did you think Mike wants to be baptized? Yes you are correct, immersion. So we can't baptize Mike today since we don't have the facilities to offer immersion, but the good news is that we can start planning to build a pool! It would save me my monthly YMCA fee for my swimming and I am sure others would enjoy it as well

just kidding. We will find a way for a baptism by immersion for Mike and we will all be there ... right?!?!? Baptism is not a private affair because in our baptism liturgy we all agree to support each other. We become a family of God's love. That is something I want to talk about this morning. Scripture tells us that nothing can separate us from the love of God and I

wonder, as baptized children of God do we really believe it or know it? I read a story about a woman that really touched my heart and I want to share it with all of you this morning.

Elsie not only was forced to sit in a pew other than the one where she normally sat, has that ever happened to you? The seat you always sit in someone else is occupying ... what a way to start a worship service! Anyway Elsie not only lost her seat, but it was going to be a baptism Sunday ... a Sunday where she would just as soon stay at home. Elsie was raised to believe that Sunday was the Lord's day and she never missed Sunday worship. Worship was a joy for her. But whenever there was a baptism she struggled due to a secret that she had shared with no one, not even her late husband. Her parents had known but they were long gone.

Then it happened. Her discomfort grew to panic as the pastor was headed her way carrying the baby that was just baptized. It was a custom in the church for the pastor to give each baptized baby to someone in the congregation to hold as a way of welcoming him or her into the family of God. The pastor smiled as she gave Elsie the baby and one of Elsie's greatest fears had been realized. What was she going to do? She couldn't just hand the baby back to the pastor or ask her to give him to someone else. The child deserved better than that on his important day. But it wasn't right ... it just wasn't right. If others had known her secret, they would know that she had no business holding the child of another during this sacred moment.

Elsie bit her lip and hung on to the baby, trying hard not to let her discomfort show. At last the pastor took the baby back to his parents and Elsie sighed relief. The whole episode was so disconcerting that Elsie quietly left church as everyone stood to sing the next hymn.

That very day Elsie called the pastor and asked to see her. Elsie was determined to share with the pastor what had been eating at her all these years. Elsie knew if she didn't share it now, she would carry it with her into eternity.

As Elsie shared with the pastor about her anxiety and leaving service early, her whole story came out. Elsie explained that at age 16 she had a child out of wedlock and her parents kept her home from school as soon as they found out. Her father simply told the teacher that Elsie was needed home on the farm which was a common occurrence in those days. No one thought twice about it and no one ever found out about the baby. Elsie's mother assisted her in the delivery. The baby was very small and had difficulty breathing and died within a couple of weeks of being born. He was buried in their family cemetery located on their land. Elsie never had the baby baptized for fear of what the pastor might say and never shared with anyone else about it. The tears started coming as Elsie expressed her thoughts that occurred every time a baby was baptized in church. She couldn't help but think of her own baby and wondered if her baby was all right since he hadn't been baptized.

Her pastor put her arms around her and held Elsie for what seemed a very long time. Pastor asked Elsie if she trusted her to which Elsie

responded “yes”. Together Elsie and her pastor made some brief plans for the following church service on Sunday.

As the pastor preached on the baptism of Jesus as recorded in Mark’s gospel which we all heard this morning, she emphasized how Mark chose his words carefully when he said that Jesus saw “the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” Jesus didn’t just see the heavens open; he saw them “torn apart”. This was very dramatic! God was needing to break into our world in a big way! Jesus’ first sermon, about he sowing of the seed on different kinds of soil, would quote Isaiah when the prophet had said, ‘These people have ears but can’t hear, eyes but can’t see.’ In other words, we just weren’t getting it. So when Jesus’ ministry began, he didn’t just see the heavens open, he saw them torn apart. That’s what it was going to take to break into our own little worlds and get through to us.

What God needed to get through to us was about who God is. God is love, and nothing else that isn’t about love. Or as John put it in his letter, “that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). Sometimes we, God’s precious children, keep trying to make God into someone and something else ... something besides love. Many times our own traditions, what we have learned through others, isn’t always helpful or even true. Have you ever heard “God helps those who help themselves?” Well, I used to hear those words too as I was growing up, but truth is those words don’t come from scripture ... it is a saying. But the words torn apart are in scripture and not just in today’s reading but also at the end of the Mark. Mark uses those words when Jesus first appears at his baptism, and when Jesus leaves at his death. Recall these words, “Then Jesus gave a loud

cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.” (Mark 15:37-38). The temple curtain was torn apart. These are very demonstrative words ...TORN APART. God needed to break through in order to get us to see and hear who God is.

Then Elsie’s Pastor proceeded to give examples of how God is a God of unconditional love which Jesus came to show us. She hoped that Elsie would hear and accept that God is love and not anything else. Would God have abandoned her little son because she had failed to baptize him? NO!

At the end of her message, the pastor announced that Elsie had something she wanted to share with everyone. Elsie got up and faced the congregation standing in front of the baptismal font. Elsie proceeded to share her story and as she finished the pastor took the cover off the baptismal font and invited everyone in the congregation to join hands as they prayed. And then, calling Elsie’s long lost child by name, she commended him to God. Then she prayed the Prayer of Thanksgiving over the Water: Pour out your Holy Spirit, so that those who are here baptized may be given new life. Wash away the sin of all those who are cleansed by this water and bring them forth as inheritors of your glorious kingdom. In other words “being born of water and spirit.” It is a both/and NOT an either/or.

When the prayer was finished the Pastor invited the congregation to come forward and dip their hands into the water to remember their baptisms. Elsie was the last to come. Her hands trembled as she lifted them up out of the water. Somewhere deep inside herself she heard a voice saying that all was well: “You are my beloved child.”

So regardless of what our past is, this is a new day. God loves you ... there are no if, ands or buts about it. This morning we are all invited to come forward and RENEW our baptism and reaffirm or renew that love as part of God's family. As you come to the baptismal font, dip your fingers in the water and touch your forehead and I will respond with "Remember your baptism and be thankful." Please come forward as the spirit gives you lead. Amen.