

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Matthew 3: 13-17
“Come to the Waters! Baptismal Ecology”
4th Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2015

Our summer series is entitled “Come to the Waters!” We began the series last Sunday with how the writer of Genesis 1 account imagined that the creation of the cosmos was initiated with God’s Wind-Breath-Spirit sweeping over the face of the chaotic waters.

Today we turn to a New Testament story about water. It is the story of Jesus’s baptism as told by Matthew.

Today we focus on the waters of baptism. And because it is Father’s Day, the picture that is in my mind’s eye is of all the daddies I have known who have brought their babies to the waters of baptism. One of the things that I love most about my job is that I get to visit with the daddies (and the mommies too) in their homes as we prepare for their children’s baptisms. It is a lot of fun to listen to parents telling great, often amusing, stories about their kids and a deep privilege to hear their dreams for a better world for their children. However, the best moment, the moment that takes my breath away every time is when I ask the question of the parents, “Do you promise to live the Christian faith and to teach the faith to your child?” and when the parents say, “We do.”

To say, “We do,” in response to the question, “Do you promise to live the Christian faith and to teach this faith to you child?” is a momentous promise when one really stops to think about it. It is a momentous promise because when parents make this promise they are promising to replace the narrative by which one’s surrounding culture strives to shape one’s life with the narrative of Jesus, both in their own lives and in the way that they raise their children.

Take the narrative which we have read today, the narrative of Jesus’s baptism. What does it mean, really, that Jesus was baptized?

Certainly, the meaning of baptism is multivalent. The power of the symbolism of the baptismal waters is that it can’t be reduced to a single simple meaning. However, here is what I believe to be the central meaning that is conveyed in Jesus’s baptism, and it’s from this central meaning from which all other meanings ripple outward is that when Jesus walked down into the waters to be baptized what he was doing was dramatizing for the world what God intends the world to be. Jesus walked down into those waters, and he showed us that God is one of us, a human being. And God spoke, “You are my beloved Son,” and this means that not only Jesus, but all of us are God’s beloved too. And when Jesus came up out of the waters to set out upon the road of ministry, he shows us, his body, his church, his beloved children, that we are to write the narratives of our lives according to the narrative which guided his.

And what was the narrative that guided his life once he had risen up from those baptismal waters in the Jordan River? It was this: that whenever society drew a line in the sand and divided people so that some were “in” and some were “out,” so that some were privileged and some were marginalized, Jesus erased that line in the sand with his sandaled foot and then reached down and redrew the line so that it was no longer a line separating people from one another but rather a big, wide circle. He stretched out his arms and swept into the middle of the circle the lepers, the women, the Samaritans, the slaves, the people who were possessed by evil spirits, and then in so many ways, he filled up the circle with cool, clear, refreshing baptismal water, and then he showed us how to splash and play and swim together in this great big swimming pool of humanity of which we, all of us named by God as beloved children, are all a part.

Now there is a lot of stuff in this world, powerful stuff, evil stuff that does its dead-level best to erase the Jesus narrative from our lives, to poison the baptismal ecology that God put into place in creation. We have seen evil writ large in the shootings that happened at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston on Wednesday night and in the racism that birthed this violent act. In breathtaking contrast, we have also seen an incredible living out of the Jesus narrative in the statements—statements full of the love and forgiveness which Jesus lived and taught--which were made on Friday by family members of the shooting victims.

What does it mean for us, and when I say us, I mean most of us in this congregation, that is, we who are white Anglo and thereby privileged in countless, ways simply because of the hue of our skin to live according to Jesus’s narrative of baptism in these days? It means I have to believe, that it means searching our hearts and confronting the racism that is within us and within the structures of our society. It means understanding the

history of the racial narrative and setting it aside so that every racist structure we can be the community of Gods beloved children. It means living the Christian faith and teaching it to our children.

Confronting the racism within us is uncomfortable, but I am grateful that I have been called to stand in the pulpit of a church where confronting racism is a part of our heritage.

Carl Pritchett was preaching from the pulpit of DCPC on February 19, 1950. In the middle of his sermon, the siren at the fire station on Main Street began wailing. Carl cut his sermon short, gave a final prayer, and told the congregation to leave and help put out the fire. The fire was on Brady's Alley, the walkway between Toast and the Needlecraft Center. In their history of Davidson, *One Town, Many Voices*, Jan Blodgett and Ralph Levering write that there were 87 poor and working-class African-Americans who lived in eleven small, run-down rental houses on Brady's Alley. Carl Pritchett appealed to the town and to the students for clothes for the families, but he didn't stop there. The literal fire was extinguished, but Carl and others tended the flames of the Spirit, organizing a town meeting in the high school auditorium, attended by roughly 350 residents, that led to a broad-based community effort to improve living conditions. A Citizen's Housing Committee was organized. They came up with a practical plan of action: passing a new housing ordinance which required that all houses have bathrooms, sewer service, and electricity with the town board spending \$30,000 that summer and fall to provide the sewer serve to Brady's Alley which had heretofore been lacking. (1)

We tell this story with pride and appreciation now, with historical hindsight telling us that this was the absolutely Spirit-led and right thing to do. But it wasn't so easy when it was happening. Not everyone appreciated that the church should be involved in such things. Carl Pritchett was interviewed by Don Shriver for a collection of Presbyterian civil rights sermons entitled *The Unsilent South*, published back in 1965. Shriver writes that Carl Pritchett repeatedly had preached the New Testament view of race relations to several generations of college students, but as he took in the full meaning of the fire on Brady's Alley, Carl Pritchett said, "I decided to go to the end of the road on the issue." And he went on to say that it was the only time in his entire ministry that he had ever needed medication to be able to go to sleep at night. (2).

Confronting our racism, living according to the narrative of Jesus, keeping our baptismal promises—this is not easy. But here is the thing: we don't have to do it alone and we don't have to do it perfectly. It is just up to us to step into the water and trust that God will take it from there.

And so today let's take a step into the water. There isn't a fire in Brady's Alley today. But the fire of racism is still burning in the heart of our society. Let's do today what the congregation did on a February Sunday in 1950. Our brothers and sisters at Davidson Presbyterian Church are waiting to welcome us and to pray with us and to help us heal from the disease of racism from which our nation and community have suffered for far too long.

1. Jan Blodgett and Ralph B. Levering, *One Town, Many Voices: A History of Davidson, North Carolina* (Davidson, North Carolina: Davidson Historical Society, 2012), 164-165
2. Carl Pritchett. Quoted by Donald W. Shriver, Jr., editor, *The Unsilent South: Prophetic Preaching in Racial Crisis* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 100.