

THE END OF THE RESOLUTIONARY WAR

Texts on Sunday, January 11, 2015

Acts 19: 1-7; Mark 1: 4-11

At the opening of a new year comes a sense for a fresh start. Employees are back to work, bosses have new projects. Newly elected leaders are installed at just at this time of the year. Most Presbyterian churches soon hold annual meetings and elect their new leaders. Even the sun seems in on it, rising earlier, setting later. In our culture, January—more than any other time on the calendar, religious or secular—is the time to turn out the old and bring in the new. Our resolution feels strong, the goals worthwhile. And yet, there is a shadow over our smile, for we remember past resolutions, dusty boxes in the basement. Will this January be any different? Our excuses for failed resolutions pile up, but they don't stand up. Our will is weak. It is a constant puzzle to us. Maybe this time . . .

To get a handle on our difficulty with actually changing, it's important to see that we're not dealing with just one person in here; each of us contains several people. Think about some old habit you stumble into from time to time. When you get your balance back, don't you sometimes say, "I hate it when I do that"? Look at that sentence. *I* hate it when *I* . . . do that. Those are two "I's." They are not the same person. The apostle Paul wrote about this. Watch my hand: *up* and *down* signal two different selves.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want ... it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it, for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. (Romans 7:15-19)

It sounds like two cats in there. Suppose you make a resolution to get more exercise; or to lose weight. What happens? You make the promise to yourself. But to which self? How can January Self face down February Self, who controls the couch and the kitchen? If they both vote, who wins? I've read that fitness clubs make their annual profit off the payments of hapless January selves pushed around by their bigger February selves. Resolutions fail because we are not dealing with just one person. I call this tiresome weak wish to change "the resolutionary war." It has been going on forever.

Deep-going, lasting change is a matter of first concern to humans. Let's admit, however, that our methods mostly fail. Now, the spiritual paths of world religions also take deep-going, lasting change very seriously, but the big difference is that the great teachers did not fight the resolutionary wars. Jesus is a way toward a peace not like the world gives peace. The world seeks

peace through strong-willed resolutions of conflicts. But we are no good at this, which is why our wars go on and on without end.

Today is traditionally called *The Baptism of the Lord*. Let us look at two baptism stories to shed light on how Christian faith can bring an end to the resolutionary wars.

Notice first how Mark describes what John the Baptizer is up to down at the Jordan. He was “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John’s ritual was apparently very popular. Mark makes it seem like a huge tent revival, with thousands trekking down to the Jordan to confess their sins and break the waves. But John cautions the crowds about his own ritual. He tells them of one yet to come “more powerful than I.” “I have baptized you with water,” he says, “but he will baptize with Holy Spirit.”

John is saying that his own baptismal ritual just is not much, compared with what is possible. It’s just a water baptism, he says; a way for people to screw up their courage in an effort to force change. Take me to the river, drop me in the water. It’s a good thing, John is saying, but not a God-thing. This baptism is a new year’s promise, a skirmish in the resolutionary wars. Yet a power for transformation is coming, greater than any resolution.

In the story from the book of Acts, Paul arrives in Ephesus and meets some new disciples. His first words to them suggest that he is puzzled by them. “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” He is asking because he can’t tell; he gets no sense that God Holy Spirit is with them. They say— *Holy spirit? We know about spirits, but we never heard of “holy.” We were baptized in the manner of John the baptizer.*

Now here it comes again—that same distinction between water baptism and Holy Spirit baptism seen in Mark’s gospel. Paul explains that something is missing. He says, “John baptized for repentance” and told people to watch and wait for Jesus. In other words, repentance is a human thing. Pouring water over a sorry head is like a new year’s resolution, a symbol of strong intention, but it comes from the will of the flesh. Resolution and repentance don’t work with spiritual power. They are skirmishes in the resolutionary wars.

Here is a little fact which the Christian church has mostly ignored. In the New Testament, every baptism in Christ is accompanied by the Holy Spirit suddenly gracing people with powerful gifts plainly evident to everyone present. After John, there are no water baptisms in the Bible. People don’t decide to get baptized in order to join the church. The usual pattern is that people receive powerful spiritual gifts which help them help others—healing, prophesying, and more—and then they are baptized. Sometimes, it happens the other way around; first baptism, then the spiritual gifts.

The early church changed the whole pattern pretty quickly. It's easy to see why. If they all had to wait for God to act wholly spiritually, well, the church would have been in a squeeze. How could you schedule baptisms? What if you did, and Holy Spirit didn't show up? How could you baptize babies? Babies can't use spiritual gifts! If they had waited on God, the church would never have grown fast enough or big enough to amount to anything in the world. It's a one hour service, after all; you can't leave the work to God. So they made it okay for baptism to be initiated by humans again, as with John's water baptism. They made it okay if the Spirit didn't show or bestow gifts on believers. Humans were in control again. Whew!

Is this a problem? Yes and no. It is not a problem in the sense that the church as we know it would not exist if baptism had been reserved for times when spiritual gifts showed up in individuals. What happened instead is that baptism became a membership ritual, a way to celebrate the serious decision to join the church. In this way, the church built strong walls through hundreds of years. Our whole culture has been shaped by this history of the church, and our culture delivers us to our time in history. We are children of our culture. Every thought we have, including every sharp critique of our patterns and prejudices, is a child of all that has come before, including this practice of baptism as membership ritual, rather than a sign of God's gift of spiritual power. We cannot meaningfully renounce this history. So: Blessed be our baptisms. May God Holy Spirit attend on the nurture and admonition of each child of God whom we bring before the church in baptism.

But there is a sense in which it is a problem that the church long ago took control of the meaning of baptism. Baptism as a ritual to scheduled on our calendar reinforces the old notion that what matters to God is how sorry we are, how badly we want to change, how strongly we resolve to be good. This is childish religion, modeled on how we parent, but it is wrong religion. How often a parishioner on the far end of life has said to me, "Pastor, I just hope I've been good enough to get into heaven!" Don't they see that they have missed the whole gospel? No, they do not, because churches failed to tell God's promise in a way they could hear.

Many churches do not teach the unconditional love of God. They teach conditional love: Be baptized, be a member of God's favorite tribe, behave, and then, God will love you; then God will help. This is how churches have taught and fought the revolutionary wars, unaware that they have sold the birthright of Holy Spirit for a bowl of porridge. Making resolutions when we think we know what is missing and what we must strive for—whether that is God or guns or being pretty or having money. Strong-willed resolution, after all, is the way of the world. It's how politics and armed forces and

businesses and even churches struggle for dominance. The revolutionary war is not the way. Is there another way?

What if you are already all right? What if nothing you are striving after, not even your idea of God or Jesus, can satisfy you and solve your problems? What if you rested in God's promise: "Surely I know the thoughts I have for you, thoughts of peace and not evil, says the Lord—to give you a future with hope." (Jer 29.11) What if you stopped striving, even for 7 seconds?

Of all that might be learned from the Bible's baptism stories, this is most important. There, there is no striving after God; no heart-felt, anguished act of repentance, no catechism to learn, no certificate: just the free gift of God's Spirit to people rejoicing in their ability to help others. Look, we are not going to change our baptism ritual. But we can pay close attention to what it can mean to join the community of Christ in the manner of the gospel freely given. Here are three practices which the stories of Holy Spirit baptism teach the attentive church.

First, like the early church, learn to wait for God Holy Spirit, knowing only that you know nothing of what surprises and what power God can give. This means not asking God to do what you want, as if God is an especially talented manservant at your side. No. Wait upon the Lord, the scriptures say, over and again. In the midst of hungers and unhappiness, wait upon the Lord. Seek peace not like the world gives peace. Go into your room, shut the door, and practice waiting without striving.

Second, as a church, learn to see the spiritual gifts given to people. Take it as a promise that God Holy Spirit gives gifts to everyone, but not on a schedule, and not according to expectations or institutional needs. Gifts come to those who wait upon the Lord. Become curious to find out the marvels of growth in your people. Learn to see them and celebrate them.

Finally, do not be mere members of a tribe, proud of your dividing wall, separating you from people out there. Rather, like those first Christians, live into the risk of giving up the protection of tribal identity that comes from being a member of your group. Trust God. Let go the idea that you are special in any way, so that you may live as if the love of God moves in all people everywhere, as the love moves in you. Let yourselves become a community waiting to find out who you will become, and what your mission is. Then you will be done with the revolutionary wars, one and all, and you will be ready to serve without striving in the peace of Christ.