



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
January 13, 2019 Sermon

Cement Between Human Souls That God Should Unite With Us

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 139:1-14, Matthew 3 (selected verses)

I have had a heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures.—the novelist, George Eliot, in a letter to Charles Bray, July 5, 1859

Incredible that God should unite himself to us—Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*

Preface to First Scripture Lesson

Incredible that God should unite himself with us. Our First Scripture Lesson tells us that there's no place we can go apart from God. If you find that comforting, consoling, reassuring, even breathtaking—you're not alone. Some of the greatest saints have felt the same way. If on the other hand, you find that distressing, discouraging, alarming, even suffocating—you're not alone. Some of the greatest saints have felt the same way. In fact, usually the same saints. There's a reason Jacob wrestled all night with God; and was thereafter named Israel . . .

Preface to the Second Scripture Lesson

I want to puzzle your puzzler for a moment.

Today is Baptism of the Lord Sunday, the Sunday when we remember—when we celebrate—Jesus' being baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist.

But **why** was Jesus baptized? John's baptism was, after all, a baptism of repentance, for the forgiveness of sin, for the one being baptized to be cleansed of his or her sins. But Jesus was without sin. So, again, **why** was Jesus baptized?

And by the way, this is no mere academic puzzle invented by commentators centuries later. John the Baptist himself asks this question when Jesus comes to him—“**You** want to be baptized by **me**?!” he asks, “**I** should be baptized by **you**!”

Jesus' response to John, as well as the word that comes down from heaven as Jesus comes up out of the water, is the solution to our puzzle. But meaning of both is not immediately obvious. Listen, and see what you think. I'll be reading from Matthew Chapter 3, the Baptism of the Lord. . . .

Sermon

“I have had heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls.” So said Mary Anne Evans, the 19th-century English novelist who wrote under the pen name, George Eliot. By that she meant that people who shared her opinions—political and ideological—were nowhere to be found when she needed friends, when the world scorned and shunned her—which it did.

Flip it over, however, and the reverse is also true: sometimes there is a bond between human souls—a friendship—that transcends differences of political and ideological opinion.

Many Presbyterian pastors are blessed to find this out in their first call. Whether coming out of San Francisco Seminary (that would be over here, on your left) or Pittsburgh Seminary (that would be over here, on your right), they get to their first church only to find that their most trusted supporter, that person of sound wisdom and good and godly counsel, the who has both the pastor’s best interests *and* the church’s best interests always at heart, and is always looking out for—and willing to do anything for—both, the one who will stick with you, stand by you, through thick and thin—*that* one person happens to be on the opposite end of the political spectrum. In fact, happens to hold mostly the “wrong” political and ideological opinions. And the two learn not only to live with those differences, but to laugh about them. And that, my friends, is a blessing.

This is not to say that political and ideological opinions—and especially their corresponding issues—don’t matter; they do. And it’s not to say that faith doesn’t have something to say about them, and shouldn’t be brought to bear upon them; it does, and it should. But it is to say that they are not the tie that binds us together.

What is the that binds us together? Well, we get closer to the answer when we speak about shared vision and shared allegiance.

“What? You, too? I thought I was the only one.” So according to C.S. Lewis, does human friendship begin. It’s when we see something a certain way, especially when we value something, especially when the rest of the world doesn’t seem to see or value it the same way.

And it doesn’t matter what it is: 17th-century metaphysical poets or vintage Dodge Challengers, *Black Mirror Bandersnatch* or *Mary Poppins Returns*, fancy stitching in needlepoint or advanced statistics in baseball, it doesn’t matter—what does matter is that we both care about it—passionately—and see it more or less the same way (although sometimes the differences in our shared vision can be as exhilarating as the underlying similarity).

Our passion for it—our allegiance to it—is part of who we are, and because it is part of who we are, when that passion and allegiance is shared, it can create a strong bond. You and I, when we share a vision and allegiance, become a “we.” I’ve heard tell that this can even happen over something as inconsequential as college football—I know it seems silly, but apparently it’s true.

Shared vision, shared passion, shared allegiance—this gets closer to the tie that binds, but it doesn’t get all the way there. Because, sometimes in those rare moments when we’re not talking about the poetry or the cars (or the poetry of the cars), the TV series or the movies (or the TV series of the moves), the stitches and the statistics (and all the various ways to count them), sometimes when we’re not talking about our beloved Buckeyes, in those oh-so-rare moments, we may realize

that we have precious little else in common. That's not necessarily bad, but it does mean that it is not so much you as a whole person that's precious to me, as it is that part of you that's the passionate enthusiast. It's *not* that I love baseball statistics and *not* you; it's rather that I love you because of, and through, my love *for* baseball statistics. And we are bound together by that love, but only insofar as we share it. Again, that's not necessarily bad, but it may not be—it probably isn't—enough to bind us together through thick and thin.

So what is the tie that binds us together? Sharing a world—not just a particular passion, but a world. Which is why Jesus allows himself to be baptized by John. So that he can share our world—completely and in every way.

Please note that this does not mean he shares our sin; our sin is not human, it is what makes us and our world less than human, inhuman, in fact. But he does share our present human condition and our present human world—the condition and the world that we live in here and now—one that has been burdened with sin and the death it brings. Which is why he bears our sin to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And also why he is baptized—not because he has sin or has sinned, but to share our condition and our world with us, not just in one way, but in every way. His baptism is an act of solidarity: it is the tie that binds him to us, us to him, and us to one another.

Now I know when it comes to binding us to one another, this might not seem like enough, either: someone could argue that we have church friends in the same way we have root-for-the-Buckeye friends, needlepoint friends, car-club friends, bridge friends, or binge-watch-Black-Mirror friends. You see them once a week or so, and the vision and allegiance you share does create a kind of bond between you, but only in one way; otherwise you may have precious little in common; in fact, you may know precious little else about each other, including about each other's political and ideological opinions—although you may harbor your secret suspicions about them, and they may be more than suspicions, especially if you're also Facebook friends.

So today at the risk of dividing us, I'm going to come right out and say it—yes, aloud, right here, right now. It's something you may already know, or at least suspect, but I need to say it aloud anyway, here and now. Please keep calm: it will no doubt shock some of you, and even if you already knew or at least suspected, hearing the words said aloud—and in church, no less—may cause you to recoil in horror. But I have to say it anyway.

Here goes: there are Michigan fans among us, Michigan alumni even. (Please, please stay where you are. Ushers, the doors, please.) They even hold positions of leadership. Here. In this church. Yes, even on a day like today, when weather has reduced our number to the hearty—or perhaps, foolhardy—few, they are still here—loyally, faithfully here. (Are you back there in the choir, Dave Grupe? Not to point anyone out, mind you.)

And the same is true for other, less consequential, differences among us: Republican and Democrat, Liberal and Conservative, Millennial and Boomer, Trumpian and anti-Trumpian. They are all here—loyally, faithfully here.

And to all that, all I can say is this: Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord. Because his baptism is act of solidarity: it binds him to us, us to him, and us to one another.

It's *not* that we love Jesus and *not* one another; it's rather that, because Jesus first loves us, we can love both him *and* one another. He is, in the phrase of one medieval theologian, the first friend, the hub through which all the spokes connect. We love him and love one another, because of, and through, his love for us. And that means we share not just a particular passion or enthusiasm, but a world and his love for it.

Not only a world, but *the* world. Jesus, the Gospel of John tells us, is the life of the world. He is the hub, the one who gave the world life and continues to do so. And because Jesus shares our human condition and our human world, we share his life—we are no longer burdened with sin and the death it brings. He has borne that burden for us. We have life, his life, life eternal.

And so we are baptized into his baptism, and so born again into his life. This is why Jesus says, when John hesitates to baptize him, “let it be so for now, for this is the right way to fulfill all righteousness.” To fulfill all righteousness—that is, so that we and the world can share in God’s life, be right with God and one another, be what we were meant to be. And this is why the voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. He is the one who saves us, who sticks with us, stands by us, through thick and thin:

If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
Even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,”
Even the darkness is not dark to you;
The night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you
And so, though his baptism, we are bound together.

Bound together, even with those who hold the “wrong” political opinions, who are at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Bound together, so that we can learn not only to live with those differences, but to laugh about them. And that, my friends, is a blessing.

Blessed be the tie that binds.

Thanks be to God though Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.