

Message: "Motions Worth Going Through" - 1-11-2026

Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

¹³Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

What an awful week this has been. ICE agents shot and killed a woman in Minneapolis, Minnesota; her name was Renee Nicole Good, she leaves behind a spouse and three children. The incident was caught on more than one video stream. I bet many of us here have seen those videos, which are horrendous and sickening; many of us have heard the immediate reaction of our country's leadership, which solidly vilifies this young woman and denies any culpability for national policy. Notably absent is any comment of regret or sorrow; only flailing defense of the indefensible. I find this nothing less than shameful and lacking any semblance of judicial process; perhaps you have the same reaction. Mostly I'm angry and sad.

This week has been made worse by news of our country's leadership threatening to take over Greenland, to inject military forces into Mexico, to run Venezuela, and to take over Cuba; our president was asked about a possible military incursion into Columbia, to which he said, and I quote, "that sounds like a good idea." Violence seems to be the language of the day

Also, there's now an inverted food pyramid that touts the benefits of increased red meat and minimal whole grains, which reflects pretty much the exact opposite of the counsel of almost all creditable health experts. Against the protests of medical professionals, vaccine recommendations have been reduced by a third at the same time that measles rates are skyrocketing as are cases of the flu. I could go on, but I'd only be repeating the dominant news about our country's misbehavior - but anyone who's paying attention knows things are very wrong in America.

People of conscience are asking the same question: What is becoming of our country? People of faith know we cannot remain silent as we see so many

examples of violence and hatred and brutality fueling our national policy and conduct, things which are causing great harm especially to the most vulnerable among us; these are things Jesus spent most of his time on earth addressing, and asks us to address as we follow him. Our nation is becoming identified more and more with a police state; our leadership's dominant approach to diplomacy is threat and military engagement; much of the world is watching us descend rapidly into an unrecognizable form of a country whose moral leadership is dissolving before our very eyes. I had a conversation not long ago with a pastor in Canada, who asked me a poignant question: "Where did America's goodness go?"

Forget our country being great; we not even being good to our own people let alone other nations. Our identity as a country with integrity and virtue is in exponential decline.

So what on earth does a scripture lesson about the baptism of Jesus have to say about our present national dilemma?

At first glance, I thought the scripture lesson for today was one we ought to skip, for feels like a passage full of blissful images and spiritual peace - words about fulfilling the will of God, the spirit landing on Jesus like a dove, immersion in cool waters, God's proclamation of his affection for his Son -- and what do such things have to say about our present context of national degradation? As it turns out, I find this passage profoundly relevant for what is going on in our country today, and what is going on in our world today, for the passage is squarely about identity - namely, who Jesus was and is in his own identity, and with whom Jesus most readily identifies. We ask this question all the time: Who was Jesus? We have many pat answers -- Jesus was and is God; Jesus was and is the Son of God; Jesus is the sacrificial lamb, the redeemer and savior of the world; Jesus was then human and is now spirit; Jesus was and is the third leg on the Trinity table; Jesus is my best friend. I've heard so many simple, creed-like statements like these, trying to make concrete what is by definition fluid.

But today, we hear the voice of God proclaim Jesus as his son, the beloved, with whom he is well pleased. It's a clear identity even if we struggle to understand what it means. That's the identity God places upon Jesus; but did you catch the identity Jesus proclaimed about himself? It's kind of easy to miss; it's found in the interchange between Jesus and his cousin John after John questions the propriety of his baptizing Jesus. John says to Jesus "I need to be baptized by you; and do you come to me?" ¹⁵But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

Do you hear the identity Jesus claims for himself? I AM HERE TO FULFILL ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS - I AM GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS FULFILLER. Now, that's kind of wordy, but I think it translates well that Jesus is saying he came to us to establish what is right and good in the eyes of God. If Jesus were asked today who are you, this might very well be his simple answer - I am someone who does what is right and good in the eyes of God. It might seem as if Jesus is just going through the motions of traditional sacrament - but such motions are worth going through as they remind and reinforce the identity of Jesus as God's son and our savior—and such motions are especially worth going through if they remind and reinforce our understanding of God's will.

Today we are invited to ask ourselves the same basic question of identity - namely, who are we? Who are we as a country? Who are we as individuals? Who are we as people of faith?

And how do we live into the realities we claim through our identity?

I recall a sort of parable that I think fits here. It comes from the 1900's in some country somewhere in the world, and to get into the spirit of the story, I invite you to think of the stereotypes of princes and royalty and high dignity. There was once a royal prince who was travelling across his country with his royal siblings and royal cousins and royal aunts and royal uncles in his royal train coach; did I mention they were royal? This was high society with elevated posh and pomp. Though he was of royalty, the prince was nonetheless kindly in manner and had a heart for people.

As it happens, on one particular day of the trip the train found itself traveling through a very poor small town when it was forced to stop; the train had hit a wagon crossing the tracks; the wagon was carrying several members of a local family. No one was killed but all family members were injured except for one young girl; as the authorities whisked the family members to local homes for recovery they asked the train occupants if they could care for the young girl for awhile until things settled. The prince said of course, whereupon he invited this young girl into his royal coach where, as it happens, dinner was being served. Everyone took their seats; the young girl, frightened and shaking, took her place at the opposite end of the richly-adorned table from the prince. The first course was quickly brought out - it was soup. Immediately, the young girl grabbed the bowl with both hands and began loudly slurping down the soup. Everyone around the table gasped inaudibly at this breach of etiquette, and the girl, horrified that she had done something wrong, stopped as well - until she saw at

the other end of the table the prince calmly pick up his bowl like she did and begin loudly slurping down his soup as well. As he did so, he added the kind of look around the room which invites - or is it, commands? -- everyone else to do likewise- which they did, as slurpily as they could. Such went the dinner from that point on, with everyone following the cue of their traumatized visitor, who was made to feel more at home as a result. Several days after this experience, the prince was asked about why he slurped the soup when it was so below him, to which he responded: "Doing something below one's nature, if done out of care for another, resets one's nature more appropriately."

I think of the baptism of Jesus showing this understanding embodied in God's son. Jesus knew his identity, but it was not just an identity of who he was in Godself; it was an identity in relation to those whom God cares about, a world full of hurting people who were desperate for God's grace. God bent to our level with Jesus, for we could never rise to God's level on our own. Jesus knew his identity as God, but perhaps more significantly, Jesus prioritized his identity as God's revelation to a needy world. And it is an identity we are invited to embrace as Christ's body on earth.

Questions of identity are crucial to any individual or community or nation's proper function. When Identity becomes confused or maligned, great harm is a short distance away. Our nation is right now struggling with its identity, not sure of what it is meant to be or do - and much of this confusion is orchestrated for purposes that are anything but righteous. Our faith is likewise under a similar kind of assault from within, where different takes on the Christian faith seem to have conveniently yet clearly left Jesus behind - I speak of Christian Nationalism, White Superiority, Christian Exclusivism, and other prejudicial faith perspectives that attempt to employ the name of Jesus for purposes of self-promotion or political power. It's as if a new pandemic is growing, a pandemic of identity crisis, where people are losing sight of what's most important about countries and faiths and humanity and creation -- that we learn to share this good earth with each other in ways that promote harmony and justice for everyone.

But when those around us lose sight of their human identity, when they forget who they are, it becomes doubly important that we remember who we are. All efforts to heal brokenness, address injustice, alleviate suffering, and set a better course must begin with who we are as followers of Jesus; all efforts to face what is wrong with the world must begin with what is right about God's son. It is as we think, speak, and act out of our identity in Christ that we follow Jesus

in this world; it is as we translate who we say we are in Jesus that we are empowered to continue our work of world transformation, starting with ourselves. Sometimes it may feel like we are simply going through the motions of faith, but if they keep Jesus in sight and mind, they are motions worth going through - and motions that will keep us moving forward.