

“Confession”

Today in our scripture passage from Mark 1:1-11 John the Baptist has summoned and called folks from Jerusalem, the countryside, and the entire region out to the Jordan River to be baptized by him. It is striking to read that “all” of the folks of the countryside of Judea and even all of the city inhabitants of Jerusalem came out to be baptized by John. There is clearly a juxtaposition between the city folk and the country folk leaving their centers and going to the margins of the Jordan River to be baptized.

Jerusalem was so significant. It was always the place the Israelites “go up” to, no matter whether they are traveling to the city from the north or the south. One always goes up to Jerusalem, almost signifying a going up to God. There is great meaning in the Gospel writer highlighting that all of Jerusalem is leaving to go to the Jordan River. As Angela Parker, professor of New Testament and Greek at Mercer University’s McAfee School of Theology discusses in this week’s *Christian Century* magazine, is there something wrong at the center in Jerusalem?

Professor Parker thinks the answer stems from what the people are doing as they go out to be baptized. They are confessing their sins. Why could they not confess their sins in Jerusalem, which is the center of traditional, institutional worship? The Gospel writer in Mark is setting the scene for what we know comes

Rev. W. Wallace Culp, III
Latimer Memorial United Methodist Church
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later, the showdown between Jesus and the center. In Mark's Gospel there is a showdown between the center of synagogue and temple worship and the meaning of walking in the way of Jesus the Christ.

Jerusalem and the Temple represent institutions, both then and now. The city and institutions can be good for society. They usually are the center of universities and learning. They provide centers of culture. They are the seat of government, which provides services to people. In the Israelite culture of Jesus's time, the city of Jerusalem provided the center of religious life, the Temple and the priesthood.

But, in the Gospel and Jesus' teachings, the city represented the status quo and was also the center of elitism and opposition to rights for all. As discussed by Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. in his book, *The Politics of Jesus*, in antiquity there was always a conflict between city folks and country folks. In Jesus' time, in Jerusalem, city dwellers, especially the Temple priests, counted their urban location and proximity to the Temple location as factors that entitled them to superior social status over the country folk. In the Gospel of John, the priests are portrayed as assuming, with condescension, that the crowd of pilgrims listening to Jesus are ignorant.

As discussed by Hendricks, the picture of the peasant who seldom ventures into the city is also the picture of Jesus who emerges from the New Testament. The

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Gospels never portray Jesus as entering any city other than Jerusalem, not even the city of Tiberias, and when he goes to Jerusalem it is only on special religious service. Indeed, Mark:1:43 tells us that at times Jesus purposely avoided all towns and cities. Further, even a cursory look at the Gospels reveals that Jesus was deeply ensconced in rural village culture. The metaphors he uses in his parables are almost exclusively agrarian, and they reflect almost exclusively the realities of village life, such as the planting of crops, dawn-to-dusk field work and huts with mud-and-palm-thatched roofs (Mark 2:4). Thus, in general the social setting of Jesus' ministry was characterized by a pronounced social and cultural divide between, on the one hand, city dwellers, in particular the Jerusalem priests, and, on the other, the country dwellers, who were the immediate compatriots of Jesus.

When we understand the basis of confession, it shows why we move away from the city, the center, the status quo. William Barclay, in his discussions on today's scripture, writes that when one repents and returns to God, confession must be made to three different people. First, a person must make confession to himself. It is a part of human nature that we shut our eyes to what we do not wish to see. At first, we do not want to change. But then we look at the mirror one day and realize that change is needed. The prodigal son had to eventually face that he was rotten.

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The first step in right relationship with God is to make confession to ourself and admit that we are in need of grace.

Second, a person must make confession to those he has wronged. He must say he is sorry to those he has wronged, hurt, injured or grieved.

Third, a person must make confession to God. The end of pride is the beginning of forgiveness. One must reach a point of humility and ask for forgiveness so that God can be merciful to one as a sinner.

The example of Jesus' baptism in today's scripture gives us guidance on the meaning of baptism and its relationship to confession. Many ask why Jesus had to be baptized. He was without sin. This is why we need to examine why Jesus was baptized, as discussed by Barclay. First, it was for him the moment of decision. He had waited for thirty years to do his work. The presence of John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness was the sign that he was to do his work. In every life there come moments of decision which can be accepted or rejected. The wasted life, the frustrated life, the discontented life, and often the tragic life, is the undecided life. The drifting life is never the happy life.

At some point, we must answer the summons and challenge of God. Have you done this in your life? If you have not, there is plenty of opportunity today to

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answer that call and be a witness for the Christ-centered life. It is no longer adequate to be idle.

Second, this was the moment of identification for Jesus. When he comes to the Jordan River, he was in the middle of a movement of the people back to God. A person might be content, and possess ease and comfort and wealth, but if he saw the emergence of a movement which was going to bring better things to the downtrodden and the poor and the ill-housed and the under-paid, there is no reason he should fail to identify with it. The really great identification is when a person identifies himself or herself with a movement, not for his or her own sake, but for the sake of others.

Third, this was the moment of approval for Jesus. No person leaves their home and sets out on an unknown way. Jesus had decided on his course of action and now he was looking for the approval of God. At his baptism, we know that God has approved his decision when we hear the voice from heaven, "You are my Son, whom I dearly love; in you I find happiness." Have you decided on your course of action? Have you sought God's approval?

As we seek God's approval for our actions, we have the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And this brings us to the fourth point about Jesus' baptism. He received an equipping from the Holy Spirit. At the time of his baptism the Holy

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Spirit descended upon him like a dove. This equipped him for his future ministry.

It was a ministry of conquest, not in the human sense, but was a conquest of love.

When you act on behalf of God, you too will be equipped with a ministry of love.

Once again, we go back to why the confession of sins took place outside the city. Confession involved changing the people's hearts and lives. Confession involves repenting and changing one's behavior. It means we must exercise wisdom in our lives. As Gloria Eaves pointed out in her recent discussion to the United Methodist Women on how to deal with anxiety in our troubled times, wisdom is knowing what changes to make in our lives and what things to keep. Such decisions are not easy and we must realize that God will give us the wisdom if we allow him to work in our lives.

And this wisdom usually does not come from the city. In this sense, the city represents institutions which are created by humans and may or may not promote justice. We may think of the institutions of government or Wall Street which tend to favor the status quo. But it goes much further than that. In the Israel of Jesus' time, the institution of the Temple favored a few and was oppressive. Even today, the institution of the church itself often does not always help the oppressed as it too often favors the status quo. These institutions tend to lead to institutional racism and institutional poverty, among other things.

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Let us not be led astray by other institutions which demand our allegiance.

As discussed by Hendricks in his analysis of Jesus' politics, many Christians today are encouraged to believe that one can only be a good Christian if they are a member of a particular political party. Have you heard that you can only be a Christian if you follow conservative values? Have you heard that have to be a liberal to be a good Christian? As rightly pointed out by Hendricks, we must transcend the categories of liberal and conservative to reclaim the politics of Jesus. We Christians must not let ourselves be deceived into either exclusive allegiance or exclusive opposition to a particular political party.

Instead, as we deal with the matters of our day, let us follow the example of John Wesley. Let us engage in communal worship, private prayer, communal prayer, and study of the scriptures. We use Wesley's quadrilateral as we examine how to approach things. We look to scripture, to reason, to tradition, and to experience as we deal with the issues of our day.

As we close today, let us once again look at the stage set by Mark's Gospel reading. We can expect a divine fragmentation at any time. Indeed, this moment occurs at 1:10, where the Gospel writer describes "the tearing of the heavens" and the "spirit as a dove descending" onto Jesus as he comes out of the water. There is no mistake that a divine fragmentation occurs in that moment.

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So, what does Mark's divine fragmentation mean for us today? As Angela Parker writes and I agree, I believe that for those of us who have waited for the confession and removal of the sins of institutional racism and institutional poverty, Mark's divine fragmentation gives hope that oftentimes justice does not come from the center. Instead, it might come when many leave the center (the institutions), decide on God's course of action for them, and gather together for confession and the revelation of the divine fragmentation. In your hearts you head to your own Jordan River, and, as Jesus did, you identify with what needs to be done for your fellow human beings and do God's work by the equipping of the Holy Spirit within you.