The Baptized Community Peace Presbyterian Church

Acts 2:37-47 21st Sunday after Pentecost

Elizabeth M. Deibert 14 October 2018

On Friday afternoon, I got a text from Eirinn, saying, “If you want some joy, stop by and see Cormac.” So after an enjoyable dinner with the Hubers and their families, who are here for Sydney’s baptism this morning, Richard and I went to Blake with Eirinn’s blessing for our first in-room visit with Cormac, 17 year old youth elder who was badly burned two weeks ago. (By the way, as the family is not always at the hospital, it is best to text Eirinn to arrange visits.) So we got fully gowned up and walked into his room to rejoice in the beautiful sight of God’s healing power. Cormac’s face looks amazing. His spirit is strong, and I am confident that with time, he will recover the full use of his arms and legs. Thank you so much for the way you have poured your hearts out in prayers and love for the Camphires. You are the baptized community at work, loving by prayer and action, nourishing and sustaining with your gifts a family after crisis. Just two weeks ago, we were reeling from the scary news, and now our relief and hope is unbounded.

Today we read one of the earliest and most descriptive passages about the intersection of communal life (koinonia) and worship in the early church. The beginning of Acts chapter 2 is the fantastic and mysterious story of the power of the Holy Spirit descending on the frightful gathering of Jesus’ followers, not long after his ascension. And what follows is a dramatic sermon by Peter and 3000 people getting baptized. Luke goes on to describe the early church in all its vibrancy. So I chose this passage for today – first because our precious Sydney is being baptized, and second, because this is the first week of Gratitude Season for us at Peace, and third because we are preparing for our day of celebration – the Festival, when we hope to welcome a thousand people to our campus for a day of fun, relationship-building. Beyond all that, this is one of my favorite passages of scripture because it describes a devoted and growing young church – a church like you!

Acts 2:37-47 37 Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” 38 Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. 39 For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” 40 And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” 41 So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 44 All who believed were together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, 47 praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (NRSV)

The writer of Acts says, “When they heard this, they were cut to the heart and asked what they should do.” The THIS to which Luke is referring when he says “When they heard this” is Peter’s sermon which follows the dramatic appearance of the Holy Spirit. Peter says that this Jesus, who was crucified is now raised, and is the Messiah, the Christ. Peter preaches on and the people are eager to respond to this news. “What should we do?” Peter says, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Christ. Turn from sin, receive forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, and celebrate this grace and your commitment to God. The promise is not just for you but for your whole family, even your children.

So we see in two brief verses the different emphases of baptism. First, we get the believers baptism viewpoint, which includes change – metanoia, repentance. Then we hear the promise is for all of you, including your children. We baptize young ones because we know God’s grace is there from the start. We encourage confirmation of baptism because we know repentance and devotion matter.

And we all hope to save ourselves from this corrupt generation. I used to think that was a terribly negative statement, but now, well, it seems a rather fitting way to describe our current culture, which is increasingly bent on greed, selfishness, and political tribalism, a generation that includes many Christians by name who do not seem to be well-acquainted with Christ’s generous spirit of love.

Look at the description of the early church, devoted to learning and community, breaking bread and prayer. Amazed at the signs of God’s presence, sharing what they had with one another with glad and generous hearts. The living church of Jesus Christ – that’s you living out the goals of Peace. Inspiring Worship, Authentic Relationships (koinonia), Nurturing Discipleship (teaching), Compassionate Outreach (adding to their number those who were being saved, caring with any who had need), and Responsive Stewardship (glad and generous hearts, sharing with those in need)

In addition to giving generously to the operating budget of Peace, and giving generously to the building fund of Peace, you are always making those extra gifts of generosity whenever there is a need. We bring our resources together into a common pool for sharing, because together we can do more. We do this as an individual congregation (helping the Camphires) and as Presbyterians together (Disaster Relief) and Christians together (building a house in Haiti) and even as people of the United States. Our Reformation founder John Calvin pointed us toward a democracy in which taxes are a way of combining resources for the common good – for schools and roads and medicare and police and public works and necessary defense? It is so much easier at church to agree on how to spend our shared resources than it is as a nation, because we feel more intimately the personal connection and the shared values. But the principle is the same – pooling our resources to make a better life for all. Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned the Beloved Community as a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of one’s fellow human beings.

I may have told you before, but I am a Presbyterian because of this kind of communal support. My dad spent a year in a TB hospital when the older kids were little, and mom got so much spiritual, emotional, and financial support from the Presbyterians that she became one.

Christian community should be so profoundly compassionate and generous, that it draws people into a vortex of God’s love, joy, and peace. Our identity as Christians calls us to an unnatural expression of generosity and love that goes beyond the ordinary. Life in the 21st century is quite different from the 1st, but we are still gathered as siblings of the Cosmic Christ, as we talked about last Sunday. *With Christ as our brother, we are family. Let us walk with each other in perfect harmony.* As Richard Rohr says, *Without connectedness and communion, we don’t exist fully as our truest selves. Becoming who we really are is a matter of learning how to become more and more deeply connected. No one can possibly go to heaven alone—or it would not be heaven.*

This means that we not only respond in a moment of crisis, but we take the day in and day out responsibility of nurturing Christian faith in our children, like Sydney and big sister, Camryn. These girls and all the children and youth of the church belong to us, as well as to their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

It is our duty and privilege to do all in our power to walk the walk and talk the talk of Christian faith with them, so they know by experience in this community the love of God in the body of Christ. Invest in relationships with both children and parents. Start today by signing up to help Damaris in the nursery during the hour you are not in worship and you will have the joy of knowing our littles by name and by character. Read to them from the children’s Bibles, so they will know the amazing grace of Jesus.

Martin Luther said, *“We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it, the process is not yet finished, but it is going on, this is not the end, but it is the road.”*  To baptize is to welcome children, youth, adults into this beloved community of Jesus Christ that is intentionally on the road together. We are the people who admit our faults and rejoice in the forgiveness of God. We are those who break bread together, loving one another deeply from the heart in a special community of learning and caring. We are the ones so grateful for our blessings that we have glad and generous hearts, eager to share what we have that we might make both the church and the world a better place in the spirit of Jesus Christ. And we prayerfully welcome with open arms all of you into this beloved community – no matter who you are and where you’ve been – you like little Sydney, truly belong!