

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 Mark 1:4-11, January 14, 2018
 Defining Moment
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

My heart hurts today. My heart has been hurting since Thursday afternoon when the news broke of the vile, profane, bigoted, disgusting words our President said in a meeting with senators working on legislation for immigration reform. My heart hurts for so many reasons – that feelings of racism have been given such voice, that these words were not universally repudiated, that today in 2018 there are those who are eaten alive by a hatred that gets spewed out in terrible words – for the people of Haiti, of El Salvador, of the countries of Africa attacked this way. And the fact that this is the weekend of observance of Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday makes it so much worse – what's happened to his dream?

And I've been wondering how – not if – how I'm complicit in all this. How do I call myself a Christian without responding in some way. Silence is complicity, isn't it. Inaction is complicity, isn't it. But what can I do? What can any of us do? I know there are others of you here this morning who were brought to tears by this appalling action and wonder along with me, what can any of us do?

The first thing I did on Friday morning when I woke up, after expressing praise to God for another day, was to be in touch with my dear friend Gaelle who I've known ever since I was in Middlebury and she was in high school – her mother and Gaelle were members of our church when they moved to town – they are Haitian – with family still in Haiti. After all these years I'm still her “second mother” – her words – and she's my adopted daughter – her mother travelled for business a lot and Gaelle stayed with me while she was gone. When I came to New Jersey and she was attending NYU, she would often come out to Glen Ridge on the weekend to stay with me.

After law school in Boston, Gaelle moved to Texas, is now married with 2 beautiful children – and we've stayed in touch. I went to Facebook and wrote her – expressing my sorrow for the words of our president, wanting her to know I stand with her and her family and all those who suffer from these deranged rantings – and asked her, what can I do? I just don't know where to start.

It was later that day when she responded: “This is so hurtful and I've been thinking all morning about how to answer your question of “what can I do?” Just keep showing compassion like you did by reaching out to me. It means more than you know. Continue to speak out – as you know, I tend to keep to myself and avoid ruffling feathers. But from now on, I refuse to keep quiet.”

Sometimes we need to ruffle feathers, don't we. It's not easy – it takes courage – it takes enormous courage - but sometimes we need to ruffle feathers. Where do we get the strength?

I believe it's from our faith. Because Christian faith is anything but a set of lofty ideals nor is it just a system of ethics and guides for behavior. The Christian faith is a

way of life together under Christ with our fellow disciples; it's a corporate life. We're all in this together.

Jesus not only preached, taught, healed and acted – he formed a community, gathered disciples, brought together the most unlikely group of people and made them a family. We can't claim to be "in Christ" without being in the "body of Christ."

That brings us to our scripture today: baptism is the door to the Body. Baptism reminds us that our faith is a group event – in baptism we become part of one another, responsible to one another, accountable to one another, supported by one another. It's held together by something ever so much bigger – the church is not what we get out of it – but rather what God, in baptism and through the church brings to us. We are welcomed into God's church through our baptism – baptism not only incorporates us into the church but also reminds us, again and again, of who we are, whose we are, and what we are supposed to be doing.

The baptism of Jesus – a baptism by water and the Holy Spirit – a voice from heaven accompanies the appearance of a dove – a voice from heaven proclaiming Jesus as God's son – with you I am well pleased – the baptism of Jesus begins his ministry. And our baptism begins our ministry as well – when we are incorporated as part of the Body of Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit for ministry. When we are directed and empowered to be bearers of the Word, the good news in the world.

We are directed and empowered! Remember that! I needed to hear this again this week.

Linda Clader is an Episcopal priest who has written about Jesus' baptism and asks the question: "What drew Jesus to the river that day, that day when John was baptizing, proclaiming a baptism of repentance? Did Jesus feel a need for repentance? Could he have seen himself as a sinner?"

"Or maybe, did he feel a need to make an outward, visible sign of his total reliance on God – because that's what repentance is too – recognizing our utter dependence on God's love and care – was that why he was there?"

She continues, "The gospel of Mark doesn't start with Jesus' genealogy, like Matthew. It doesn't start with dreams and visions and angels and shepherds like Luke – and it doesn't start with theological hymns like John. The gospel of Mark starts here, with the baptism of John, with Jesus coming to the river and undergoing a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Let's imagine – let's imagine what that must have been like.

She continues: "You've been praying. You've humbled yourself. You've taken John's hand, you've waded into the river, and you're plunged under the cool water."

"Now you're regaining your feet, and your head breaks the surface, and the water pours down your shoulders, and you feel the warmth of the sun on your face. And suddenly you see the heavens break apart, and you see and you feel the Spirit of God falling upon you, and you hear a voice – a voice speaking words that you've been hearing from the scriptures ever since you could speak – you hear a voice from heaven saying, you are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Imagine what that must have been like! Imagine hearing that you are God's child, the beloved! Imagine hearing that God is well pleased with you! Imagine the feeling of elation! The feeling of empowerment!

The spirit of God is in me! I am God's child, God's chosen! What shall I do with all the energy I feel? What shall I do with all the courage I feel? I have to spread the news! Where shall I begin?

Imagine having that experience! The truth is, every one of us who has been baptized has in fact had this very experience. Do you remember coming to the water of baptism? Acknowledging your dependence on God? Renouncing evil and asking for an outward and visible sign of God's forgiveness and your new life? Do you remember the water pouring over your face? Do you remember that rebirth? Most of us probably don't remember – but it happened. And it happens again and again as we witness and participate in the sacrament of baptism in this place. Maybe we don't remember our own baptism – but at yours and mine, that voice did speak, naming us too: you are my child, my beloved. In you I am well pleased.”

We're all participating in the life of Christ, aren't we, through our baptisms. We're dying to a life of fear, the life of defensiveness, the life of privateness. We're being reborn to a life of courage, a life of faithfulness, the life in the power of God.

It does make a difference that we're baptized. And once we're baptized, God has adopted us as God's own. God doesn't kick us out, even when we disobey. God reaches out. God searches and keeps searching. God heals our brokenness. Once God has called us in our baptism, God doesn't let us go easily. And that's a good thing.

It's we as church – the Body of Christ that calls forth the very best we have. That calls us to treat each other with a radical hospitality, a radical compassion. Lest we get caught up in our own sheltered lives, we need each other to remind us who we are and whose we are. Let's start with what we have in common – we are beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, irrevocably joined together through our baptism. We are ALL beloved children of God. And we are called to treat each other as beloved children of God.

There's an old story that's appropriate for today:

A pastor set out to deliver his sermon to his parish in Macon, Georgia, on a Sunday in the late 60s. Remember those times? The whole country was in an uproar with Vietnam and civil rights marches – women were protesting and young people were finding new and exciting ways to be outrageous.

All of this was swirling around his congregation - it included many city fathers who made it clear to their pastor that on Sundays they wanted to rest from the unrest. They wanted to come to church and slip peacefully into the liturgy, hear an uplifting, well thought-out sermon about love or something, sing a few hymns that they knew, say the old familiar prayers; and then they wanted to be done with it and go home.

Well, newcomers were showing up in church – some in jeans and long hair. The newcomers got involved in outreach ministries serving the poor, which was sort of ok with the church leaders. But the newcomers also wanted the poor and anybody else to come to church which was not ok. They even put an advertisement in the newspaper with the Sunday service schedule and an invitation to come as you are.

Inviting even more strange people to flock to the church through the newspaper, with the connotation that some of them might be black, was the last straw for the traditionalists. One woman even mailed a letter to the entire parish in which she stated that the reach of the outreach people had exceeded the grasp of any sensible person by a long shot.

So, on this particular Sunday the atmosphere in the sanctuary was tense. The text for the day included the passage – “as it is written, this people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me. You abandon the commandment of God and hold on to human traditions.” The pastor weaved the story of this passage into the world of Macon, Georgia. He looked out over the congregation who seemed transfixed. But as he paused for breath, the unthinkable happened.

The woman who had written the letter denouncing the newspaper advertisement stood up. She talked back – “do you mean to say we are wrong? Do you mean to say that for all these years we have been wrong?”

The young pastor opened his mouth to speak but nothing came out. And he stood in the pulpit – all around him silence. But then another voice in the congregation spoke up and then another and then another. And people talked of trying to become part of the church and being frozen out. And others mourned the loss of traditions held dear. And some people yelled in anger and some said they were afraid of what the church and the whole world were coming to. And many people cried.

The congregation argued with itself for about 20 minutes. And the young pastor stood in the pulpit. Then for a moment it was silent again. And he said, “I don’t know what to do – what do we do now?”

They had communion. They were strengthened by the meal together. They came together out of the waters of baptism as the gathered Body of Christ, strengthened by the power of God.

You can guess what happened – the enraged traditional woman became the instrument of reconciliation between the old timers and the new people. She was the first woman ever on the vestry, and largely through her support, the first female priest in Georgia came to that congregation. And through the grace of God in her and some others, the doors of the church opened wider to invite strangers in and to send people out to love and serve.

Gaelle was right – very simply, we are to treat each other with compassion – as Jesus treats us – and it’s time to speak out and speak up. It’s not easy, it’s risky for sure, this process is surely countercultural. But we know that by our baptisms we’re called into a whole new relationship with each other – and it’s by our baptism that we’ll have the strength and courage to live out this new relationship.

Let’s go back to the River Jordan and the baptism of Christ – the time when the heavens opened up and a voice speaks to him, you are my child, my beloved. With you I am well pleased. And let’s hear that same voice saying those words to us, calling us into our ministries – as we continue our life long journey of discipleship marked by compassion and love, strengthened by each other, giving and receiving the courage to walk as Jesus walked. Let us live into the gift we’ve all received by our own baptisms. It’s a new year – a time of opportunity and challenge for us all – by God’s grace – we are the church, we are Christ’s body in the world. And as we heard the choir sing during their anthem: Let us bring the gifts that differ, and in splendid, varied ways, sing a new church into being: one in faith and love and praise. Amen.