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“Wake Up to Your Baptism”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
Exodus 17: 1-7; Philippians 2: 1-13; Matthew 21: 23-32

September 28, 2008

As you know, I was a participant last week

in the baptism here of little Cooper Daniel Lawson,
Dewey and Bet Lawson's grandson.

Cooper was all dressed in blue for the big day,

and he fussed and complained during much of Joe's sermon
prior to the baptism (as many of us are apt to do!).

But as fate, or providence, would have it,

when the time arrived for the actual prayer over the waters
and his once-in-a-lifetime Trinitarian baptism,
little Cooper was fast asleep.

He slept through his introduction by Elder Carol Johnson;

He slept through the vows his parents, Neal and Jenn, took on his behalf:

to renounce the power of evil in the world;
to turn to Jesus Christ as authoritative in their lives,
and to trust in his grace and love;
and to dedicate their lives as faithful disciples,
obedient to Christ and his love.

He slept through the vows to the congregation

to help Cooper's parents encourage him to know and follow Christ,
and to be faithful members of Christ's church.

But when Joe doused cold water on his head,
Cooper woke up to his baptism, startled, surprised,
and dazzled by the audacious commitment these people
of faith, in faith, were making on his behalf,
without really knowing him very well at all.

And I can't help but wonder if he was thinking:
Would they still love me if they knew that I sucked my toes?
Would they be instilling so much faith in me if they knew
that I'm basically lazy and love nothing better
than to eat and sleep.

But what I really wondered as I marveled at this beautiful child of the covenant
on his high-holy day of baptism,
is if we all basically are asleep to the significance of our baptisms,
and whether we all need to wake up to our baptisms
and feel the living water.

Jesus enters the Temple Court,
and the chief priests and *presbuteros*, which is Greek for "elders",
hit him hard, tackle him, with questions concerning
his authority, his *ecousia* in Greek:

Who do you think you are? What are *your* credentials?

By what authority do you do these things:

miracles, healings, exorcisms, violations of the Sabbath, teaching,
preaching, making disciples, and subverting *our* authority?

Who ordained *you* to this ministry and who gave *you* power over us?

But Jesus' claim to authority, based on who he is as God's son,
is NOT something that he will be able to justify to their satisfaction.

And so, using typical rabbinical argument, Jesus parries

by answering their question with another question
concerning the wildly popular John the Baptist.
From where did John's authority arise: from God or from the people;
from heaven or from earth?
To which the high priests and the *presbuteros*, our predecessors,
have no good answer.
If they can't see God at work in John the Baptist,
then they certainly aren't going to be able to see *God made flesh*
in Jesus, the Christ. And so they punt. They don't know.

And our tendency at this point is to vilify the high priests and the *presbuteros*;
to throw rotten tomatoes and boo them off the stage.
How dare they put *our* Lord, Jesus, on the hot seat
and try to confuse him with trick questions!
But I think we, instead, should be grateful to them,
and claim them as our *honorable* predecessors
for asking *just the right questions*,
even if the answers are complex and not immediately forthcoming,
Because the questions they ask are
terribly important to our baptismal identity today and everyday.
Does Jesus hold a place of ultimate authority in our lives and in the church,
or are we just going through the motions as if he did?
Is the living Christ really the center of our life together?
And what does it mean for Jesus to be our authority?
Because if Jesus is not the center of our life together,
then flocking to the sanctuary once a week for worship,
Sunday School and stewardship season,
fellowship dinners and ice cream socials, choir practice, session and diaconate
are nothing more than empty rituals.
And as much as we would like to cast an evil eye

on those high priests and *presbuteros*,
they are asking valid questions
that keep resounding through the halls of church history.
They are asking the questions that we should be asking
before every worship service:
Who is the real great high priest presiding over this service?
And they are asking the question that we should be asking
before every session meeting:
who is the chief elder presiding over this meeting?
If the answer to those questions is not Jesus Christ,
then we have a problem, Houston, to which we must own up.
If the answer to those questions is not Jesus Christ,
then secularization is slowly creeping, seeping in
and blinding us to where we once could see Jesus.
Don't think that secular degeneration can't happen here in the Bible belt.
It's already happened in Western Europe, where the church is little
more than a hollow cathedral-like shell;
a museum to its former glory in many places.
Wake up to your baptism! Is there living water in our font?
Is that what you want to happen to our church
and to our children's church?

We talk a lot in the Presbyterian Church about the authority of Scripture:
about whether Scripture is an inerrant authority;
about whether it is to be taken literally or metaphorically;
about whether its most valid interpretations are
from original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts,
or from the Latin Vulgate, of from the King James Version,
or from modern translations.

And I wonder sometimes, in a self-critical way,

if we've *ever* actually realized the authority of Jesus as central to our life together, or if we continue to miss the mark of being truly Christocentric.

The Roman Catholic Church seems to have missed the mark by evolving to a place where authority rested in the church itself, the institution and its traditions, instead of in the living, challenging presence of the risen Christ.

To which the Protestant reformers balked in the 16th century, and shifted the weight of authority instead to Scripture, *sola scriptura*. And if you look up the word *authority* in our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*, historical documents which include

the ancient ecumenical creeds of the church, the national creeds of the 16th century Protestant Reformation; as well as more contemporary global creedal statements, you find referents to *biblical authority, the church's authority, general councils' authority, and parental authority* - but *no direct reference to the authority of Jesus Christ himself*.

And for this reason, I have to thank the chief priests and the *presbuteros* for keeping us honest about our true orientation, just as Copernicus and Galileo once helped us understand the earth's true orientation to the sun in astronomy.

The authority of Jesus – who is he and what is he doing here?

And how do we envision what the authority of Jesus means to us today?

The best way that I have struggled and grappled with this issue of authority, is to think of the word that is at its root: *author*.

Authority and *author* both derive from the same Latin word *autor*, meaning promoter, originator, *author*.

If Jesus is the central authority of our lives, then Jesus is the *author* of our lives, the originator and the writer of the story of our lives,

which goes against the grain of what we usually think:

that God is a character in *our* story.

If Jesus is the central authority in our lives,

then we are protagonists and bit players and characters
in God's on-going story of redemption.

Mark Batterson in his book, *Wild Goose Chase*, says it this way

concerning our individual journeys:

"If you feel like you're stuck in a tragedy, here's my advice:

Give Jesus complete editorial control over your life.

You have to quit trying to write your own story.

And you need to accept Jesus not only as Lord and Savior
but also as Author (with a capital A!).

If you allow Him to begin writing His-story through your life,

it gives the tragedy a fairy-tale ending.

I'm not promising a life without heartache or pain or loss," he says,

"but I am promising a different ending." (Batterson, p. 125)

He then goes on to consider the story of the two criminals who were
crucified with Jesus, one on either side.

One hurls insults at Jesus; the other defends him.

And to the one who defends and petitions Jesus to remember him,
when he comes into his Kingdom,

Jesus turns and blesses the last day of his life on earth,
transforming it into the first day of the rest of his eternal life

with the promise, "Today *you* will be with me in paradise."

Same story; different ending.

It is interesting to me that the word "authority" is mentioned in

Matthew and Mark's gospels 9 times, in Luke, 15 times,

but it is used in the book of Revelation 19 times,

where it indicates that in the end, believers names

will be written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21: 27);
Jesus, the Lamb of God, being acclaimed as the Author of that book.
Wake up to your baptism! Is there living water in your life story?
Is Jesus the originator, the promoter, the Author of your life story?
And what about our life together as church: is Jesus also Author
of our communal life together?
Who is writing the story of our life together as First Presbyterian Church?
To whom do we give top billing when the credits roll?
Is it Peter Fish, who is compiling a history of our church,
or is it Jesus, the fish, *Ichthus*, who is writing the on-going story of
First Presbyterian Church as it pertains to God's mission?
Who was the Author of the motion to consider the ordination
of a woman, Katherine Everett,
to the office of elder of this church in 1954?
Was it Robinson Everett, who made the motion on behalf of his mother,
or was Jesus, the radical inclusivist,
the Author *ex machina* of that motion?
And who was the author of the decision for First Presbyterian Church
to remain downtown, "by history and by choice" back in the '60's,
when the trend was to move away from urban blight and out to the suburbs?
Was the session the author of that decision, or was it Jesus,
who humbled himself; made nothing of himself;
put himself last; taking the very nature of a servant?
And who was the author of the motion to designate First Presbyterian Church
a Covenant Network Community,
where any person's full membership
is honored regardless of sexual orientation?
Was Joe the author of that decision, or was it Jesus,
the one who tells a parable about two siblings working in a vineyard,
responding to the directive of their father.

One sibling complains, but ultimately complies with the wishes of the father.

The other sibling gives lip service only to the command,

but does nothing to put it into actual practice.

One son's life practice reflects the changed lifestyle which the father commands;

the other's life practice does not.

"I gotta tell you", Jesus says, "Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering
the Kingdom of God ahead of you." (Matthew 21:31)

Wake up to our baptism as a church! Who has put the living water in our font?

To whom do we give credit and give thanks for our blessed life together?

Whom do we emulate?

Whose life practice shows us the way into the Kingdom of God?

You see, Jesus does not really answer

the chief priests and *presbuteros'* questions

until he rises from the dead, and commissions his disciples

and his church for a lifetime of ministry together.

It's in his post-resurrection huddle with his disciples

high on a Galilean mountaintop where all the words from this

prior quiz-bowl encounter with the Jewish higher ups

come together as both an answer and a commission:

authority, teaching, baptism, heaven, command.

"All *authority* in *heaven* and on earth has been given to me.

Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations,

Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son

And of the Holy Spirit, *teaching* them to obey everything

I have *commanded* you.

And I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-19)

This morning we are presenting three more beautiful children for

baptism, and I hope that we are all wide awake

to the blessing that is unfolding in our midst
as Jesus, the Author of our lives, is bringing people
of all colors and nationalities together via his font of grace.

I remember when my older children, Emily and Andrew, were preschoolers
they used to sing a song that went like this:

Wake me! Shake me! Don't let me sleep too late!

Gonna put on my clothes in the morning;

Gonna swing on the golden gate.

Wake me! Shake me! Don't let me sleep too late!

Maybe that would be a good song for us to sing before every baptism
as we WAKE UP to what's really going on here.

Jesus Christ, who sanctified the water by his own baptism,
is welcoming all who believe and trust in his grace and love
into his God-family,
where we all are beloved ones, in whom God is well pleased.

And Jesus is inviting us to emulate his humility, his non-exploitation,
his anti-accumulating lifestyle, his self- sacrifice,
his devotion to God and his love for all humanity,
as he writes us into the God's book of life.

Wake up to your baptism! The risen and exalted Lord
is our Author and Authority. Amen.