

READINGS: 05/12/2019 ~ Fourth Sunday of Easter ~ \*Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30 ~ \*During Eastertide a reading from Acts is often substituted for the lesson from the Hebrew Bible ~ Mother's Day on the Secular Calendar ~ The Sacrament of Baptism.

## *High Christology*

“I give them eternal life, and they will never be lost. No one will ever snatch them from my hand. *Abba*, God, who gave them to me is greater than anyone and no one can steal them from the hand of *Abba*, God, for *Abba* and I are one.” — John 10:29-30

I'd like to start by asking a question and inviting you to think about *your* answer. Mind you, I am not inviting you to think about a correct answer or think about a text book answer or think about someone else's answer. I am inviting you to think about *your* answer.

The question: why are there four Gospels, four very different, diverse ways of telling the story of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures? We shall come back to this question eventually.

But let's leave that question aside for a time. As you know, we experienced the Sacrament of Baptism today. We Baptized children so we had some questions for the parents.

And we also had questions for the Congregation. This was asked: “Do you who witness and celebrate this sacrament, promise your love, support and care to the ones about to be baptized, as they live and grow in Christ?”

I invite you to think about your answer to that question. Mind you, I am not inviting you to think about a correct answer or think about a text book answer or think about someone else's answer. I am inviting you to think about *your* answer. (Slight pause.)

One of my mentors in seminary said to me we are Congregationalist and the Congregation, the local church, is the most important unit in our structure. This pastor, being a seminary mentor said, therefore, the most important function for those called to ordained ministry is to be a local pastor.

I took that piece of advice to heart. And, if you have ever dialed up my sermon blog on the internet, you will notice the name of the blog is <localpastor>— that’s all small case letters with no break— <localpastor>.

Among several key understandings which emerged from the Reformation about Scripture, a central idea about what it means to be a Christian is that we are, all of us, priests. Each of us is a priest.

We are a priesthood of believers. As a priesthood of believers, together we are called to ministry of some form. Indeed, I want to suggest if we are all a priesthood of believers then we are all also called to be local pastors of some form. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as the Gospel According to the School of John: “I give them eternal life, and they will never be lost. No one will ever snatch them from my hand. *Abba*, God, who gave them to me is greater than anyone and no one can steal them from the hand of *Abba*, God, for *Abba* and I are one.” (Slight pause.)

[The pastor holds up a 30 page document.] This is a publication of the World Council of Churches titled *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*. [1] The World Council is both broad and inclusive among its many expressions of the membership. The goal of the organization is to seek Christian unity.

In pursuit of this it brings together denominations in more than 110 countries and includes churches in the Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Reformed traditions. There are now 350 member church groups.

For the member churches this is a unique space in which they can reflect, speak, act, challenge and support, share and debate with each other, worship and work together. These churches are called to the goal of a visible unity in one faith.

They strive to promote a common witness in work. They engage in service by tending to human needs, breaking down barriers between people, seeking justice, peace, upholding the integrity of creation, fostering renewal in worship, mission and service.

As the title *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* implies this document lays out places where these churches agree and even disagree in those three areas. I ask the parents of children who are Baptized to read the Baptism section.

Given the approaching time of transition, last week I realized it might be a good idea for our Deacons to read it also. So I gave them a copy.

In fact, given the approaching time of transition it might be a good idea for every member of this congregation to read it. Why? You see, we *are* all a priesthood of believers. And indeed, if you want to read this document we can print it for you or e-mail a copy to you.

But what I really want you to notice is, because the World Council is who they are, this document lays out all the places in these three areas— Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry— lays out all the places where that multitude of churches I mentioned both agree and disagree. Agree and disagree— that's what I really want you to notice— agree and disagree. (Slight pause.)

Now I invite you to imagine something. Imagine yourself not here in this church but in any church in the world. Question: is it probable any two people sitting next to one another in any church anywhere believe exactly the same thing about God? Probably not.

And now put yourself back here in this Congregation. Is it probable you believe exactly what any other person here believes about God? Probably not.

That brings me back to my question about the four Gospels. Why are there four Gospels, four very different, diverse ways of telling the story of Jesus in the Christian Scriptures? (Slight pause.)

Among the incontrovertible facts we know about these four works are that Mark was written first, Matthew next, Luke next and John last. As I have said dozens of times before, the true letters of Paul were completed before any of the Gospels were recorded. Hence, the Gospels are not the earliest writings in the Christian Scriptures.

As to Mark, Matthew and Luke— these are the so called Synoptic Gospels. Synoptic means one eye and they've been given that collective name since each of these Gospels records the story of Jesus in roughly the same way.

And we can even see where Luke takes some material from Matthew and Mark and Matthew takes some material from Mark because they're written in that sequence and they probably read each other's work. John, on the other hand, approaches things in a totally different way and there is very little if any material taken from the others.

But given that sequence, one which follows the development of the Gospels, another reality presents itself. In Mark the Jesus is portrayed as being more human than divine and by the time you get to John Jesus is portrayed as more divine than human.

But did Jesus change or did the way the early Christians understand Jesus change? Or, indeed, did the experience that the early Christians had of Jesus change?

This is clear. In Mark Jesus claims to be the Messiah. In John Jesus claims to be the Messiah and says *Abba* and I— God and I— are one.

Are those statements different? Maybe, maybe not. But this should also be clear to all of us. To claim all of the Gospels— even the Synoptics— the claim that are totally in sync with each other, that they totally agree with each other is a long, long stretch.

Why? The Gospels are not— *are not*— in any way trying to convey a factual story or even facts about Jesus. The Gospels are trying to convey theology. The Gospels are trying to convey ideas about how God might be understood.

And all that brings me to a very basic question: what do you believe? (Slight pause.) Not a text book answer, not anyone else' answer— what do you believe? If the Gospels are not trying to convey the story of Jesus but trying to convey theology, what are the Gospels saying about God? And, if the Gospels are not trying to convey the story of Jesus but trying to convey theology, how should we respond? (Slight pause.)

You remember that promise made in the Baptism ceremony? It was a promise to offer our love, our support, our care.

For me, those promises say two things. First, we *are* all a priesthood of believers. We *are* all local pastors.

Second, what Christian theology really says, what the story of Jesus really says, what the Gospels really say is God— God who covenants with us— God promises to love, care and support us. And God, who covenants with us, invites us to love, care and support one another.

You see, we may not believe all the same things but we are all members of the priesthood of believers. That is especially true because as a priesthood of believers we are called to show our love, our support and our care to others. Amen.

05/12/2019

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “I have used

this quote before. It is from the Catholic theologian Richard Rhor. (Quote:)  
“Christianity is a lifestyle— a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, shared and loving. However, we made it into an established religion (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle itself. Making Christianity into a religions one could then be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish and vain and still believe that is one’s ‘personal Savior.’ The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on earth is too great.”

**BENEDICTION:** Let us go out from this place in the sure knowledge that God is at the center of our lives. Let us go out from this place in the sure knowledge that God’s love abounds. Let us go out from this place and strive to have our deeds bear witness to God’s love. And may the steadfast love of God and the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.

[1] This document can be found here:  
<https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>