

AFFIRMATION

Dr. L. James (Jim) Bankston

January 10, 2010

8:30 and 11:05 a.m.

(First Sunday after the Epiphany)



ST. PAUL'S

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

www.stpaulshouston.org

Lectionary Texts:

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

A minister I know went into his church sanctuary one day just to find a quiet place to reflect for a while. He sat alone in the dark for a few moments and then he noticed someone else had entered the sanctuary. He saw the person but she did not see him. He could tell that it was a young woman and that she was carrying a very tiny baby. She was alone, and she was not wearing a wedding ring. He watched as she made her way over to the baptismal font. She stood there a moment and then said, “If the church won’t do this, I’ll do it myself.” Then she dipped her hand into the water, put it on the child’s head, called the child’s name and said, “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” She bowed a moment and then walked out. The minister sat quietly throughout the process. That’s a true story, and it raises a number of reflections and questions for me and perhaps for you.

My first reflection is how badly the young woman wanted her child to be affirmed and loved by God. It was a natural human instinct. If she did not have a husband, perhaps she just assumed that the church would not baptize her child, or maybe she had asked someone and they had said no.

My other first reaction to the story was, “Well, I would do that. I would baptize her child.”

But then I thought, it is a little more complicated than that. The discipline of the church requires that parents be members of the church to have their children baptized. I fudge on that sometimes for grandchildren or other considerations, but basically I support that. Let me see if I can help you understand why.

Baptism, in our tradition, connects a person to the church more than it connects them to God. Baptism implies an intended relationship. Parents are asked to affirm their faith and to make a commitment to raise the child in the ministry and guidance of the church when their child is baptized. Baptism does not stand alone. It implies an ongoing relationship. If a child is baptized and never brought to church again, what are the chances that that child will grow up learning to be a person of faith? Baptism begins a process that leads to Sunday School and Confirmation and to church attendance and to life lived as a Christian. So, the scenario I described is more complicated than it seems at first look.

All that being said, if that scenario had happened to me and the young unmarried woman who was not a member of the church had asked me to baptize her child, what do you think I would say? I would say yes, because sometimes grace outweighs everything else. Now I would talk to the young woman. I would invite her to be a part of the church to follow up on her interest in her child being baptized. There was already some sense of faith present. And this was more than likely a woman in need of something positive happening in her life. The child not only needed to be affirmed as being loved by God, but she did, too.

Now, I’ve received quite a few phone calls through the years that went something like this. Preacher, we want you to Christen our baby. OK. Are you members of the church? Nope. Are you members of any church? Nope. Do you want to be

members of the church? Do you want to be supportive of the church with your prayers, presence, gifts, services, and witness? Nope. Just live in the area and thought it would be a nice thing to do.

What do you think I said in those circumstances? I say, I'm sorry, but I can't do it. I go through my reasons. You are not a member of the church. You have no faith commitment of your own. You don't want to become a member of the church. Baptism implies a relationship to the church.

In my mind, there is a difference in the scenarios. I don't want grace to be what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace.

Judgment calls on all levels are never easy, whether it is in matters of faith and practice or other more practical considerations. Sometimes people need to hear a word of grace; sometimes people need to hear a word of accountability. Would that we all could discern the difference. I do know one thing. All people need affirmation. Baptism symbolizes God's affirmation. When we baptize a child we are saying that from the very beginning of life, you are loved by God, affirmed. Now, let's be clear. God loves un-baptized children as much as he loves baptized children. Every child in every circumstance is affirmed by God. Baptism connects the child to a faith community and to parents who will make every effort to lead their child into a life of faith. Baptism connects you to church. Baptized or not, you are already connected to God, even if you don't acknowledge it. In our world, isn't that a wonderful thing to know?

It seems to me that we are short on affirmations these days. We live in a tough world. We are always looking for someone to blame, whether it is in sports or politics or religion or business or personal relationships. We are quick to find fault these days. I've been thinking about the new Mayor of Houston. Whoever you voted for, Annise Parker is the Mayor of our city for all of us now. The better she does, the better it is for all of us. And she will do a better job if she is surrounded by affirmation rather than criticism. I noticed in the *Houston Chronicle* on the day that she was inaugurated that Joel Osteen gave the prayer at the inauguration ceremony. In some sense, I think that would be understood as his affirmation of her leadership. I think

that is significant. That same day I noticed in the *Chronicle* a reference to James Holman, the first Mayor of Houston in 1837. We have a street just down the way named for him, Holman Street. In the article, it said that the list of problems for the first Mayor of Houston in 1837 included such things as rampant public drunkenness, dueling, brawling, prostitution, and profanity in this rough and tumble frontier town. We still have some of those and some financial concerns, which they probably had, too. Houston has no doubt changed in almost 200 years, but every leader at every level needs some affirmation. So do we all.

Our Gospel reading is about the baptism of Jesus. Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist when Jesus is ready to begin his public ministry. When he is baptized, God speaks. God's words are "You are my Son, with you I am well pleased." God says that to all of us. Whatever else is going on in your world, you are affirmed by God as a child of God. Like the woman who wandered into the church with her baby in my opening story and baptized her own child, we all have that same deep longing to know that you are God's child and affirmed as such. If you have any relationship with someone you love, a child or a grown person, let them know they are affirmed, loved.

On this day when we remember the baptism of Jesus, we encourage everyone to remember your baptism and know that it means for you what it meant for Jesus. God has spoken, "You are my child. With you I am well pleased." To help you remember, I'm going to carry out a centuries old tradition today of taking water from the baptismal font and flinging it out toward the congregation to remind you of your baptism. Remember your baptism and be thankful!