

The Baptismal Lens for Missional Preaching

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Often the church views baptism in ways that make it difficult to relate to its mission. We see baptism as related to the individual being baptized; we see it as initiation into the church itself by way of a particular congregation, and therefore related to the formation of congregations. On the other hand, we are concerned about the mission of the church and calling members to take part in that mission. But what is the connection of these two elements in the life of the church? Furthermore, would preaching about baptism help clarify the mission of the church? Would preaching about mission clarify the meaning of our baptism?

With this general statement of the issue before us, let us “count the ways” in which an interrelationship exists between baptism and mission, particularly when we focus on the task of preaching. In one sense, it is impossible, for the ways are countless. If we assume that scripture is written to, for, and about the people of God, and if baptism marks us as part of that people, then scripture is written to the baptized. Therefore, whatever in scripture describes or calls the people of God to their mission is written to the baptized. The connection is immediate. If much of scripture concerns the mission of God’s people, and if preaching is dealing with such texts, then preaching to the baptized frequently includes illumination of their mission.

So much for theory. In practice, much preaching in the church neglects the fact that those gathered are the baptized. Granted there may be a visitor. One hopes that is true. But such visitors may well be visiting precisely to discover what it is the baptized understand about themselves. If it is the baptized who are gathered to hear the word proclaimed, then something is already given about their relationship to the text: it is addressed to them. This basic fact ought not to be neglected.

An Example: The Parable of the Prodigal

For instance, in the familiar parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11ff), it may be tempting to let the congregation choose for themselves where they are in the story. Most will probably want to think of themselves as the prodigal. That may have been true at one time in their lives. Emotionally, it may still be true. But in some very profound sense, voluntarily sitting in the congregation of God’s people, baptized into the people of God, they are in “the father’s house.” There may be visitors who are prodigals, and there to see what sort of a welcome they might receive, but the fact that the members of the church have gathered to hear the Word proclaimed indicates at least a minimal at-home-ness that the preacher ought not to ignore. The preacher is obviously in the same situation as the congregation. The choice of roles is therefore rather limited. We are at home with the father.

If that is the beginning assumption of the preacher—and spelled out in the sermon—it means that the baptism of the congregation is taken seriously. Their baptism is significant. They are not coming to church each Sunday trying to decide if they wish to be part of God’s people or not. They are already so. They are marked as the church. The choice is really to live out what that sign means. Perhaps if they ceased

coming to church, the role of the prodigal might then be a compelling one in the parable. But sitting in church on a Sunday morning, not as a visitor but as a member, the option of the prodigal seems quite remote.

What options are then left? Here we are thrown into mission, whether we like it or not. The role of the older brother is clear, but if we wish to take that role, surely we would wish to rewrite it. Part of the mission of the church is to be open and receive with joy those who have been estranged from God and who now come home. The role of the father is open, and, as the body of Christ in the world, the church has the task of praying for and anticipating the return of prodigals. A congregation would have much to consider about its mission and the attitude mission requires, based on this parable. A stress on the meaning of their baptism would remove the more comfortable role of the returning prodigal. It is a comfortable role in our traditions, for it lets us be the ones to be welcomed, not the ones who need to do the welcoming. Granted, it implies we are sinful, but we readily admit everyone is, and as long as no specific sins need be considered, the prodigal is a satisfactory role. But it is a role without mission.

In fact, one might assume that if the identity of the congregation as the people of God, marked as such by their baptism, is the beginning hermeneutical point for the preacher, then the mission implied by the text may be easier to discover.

The Sundays after Easter

As an experiment, let us look at some of the passages assigned by the lectionary in Cycle C, to some of the Sundays after Easter. For the third Sunday, there is a text from Acts 9:1-6, with 7-20 as an optional addition. This is the account of Paul's conversion, with the additional verses showing Ananias's healing of his blindness and his baptism. If we try to identify who the people of God are in this passage, we have Paul and Ananias. There is Paul's baptism with the clear statement that he is called into this new people precisely because God has a mission for him. It is also clearly stated that this mission will involve suffering. The question can readily be raised if all who are baptized do not have a mission. It is also clear from the passage that mission does include the specific proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God to those who do not know him. Mission includes evangelism.

But there is also Ananias, the one who is already part of this new people of God. What can be understood about the church's mission from him? Even though fearful of Paul, he is obedient, and welcomes him as a brother. He is supportive of the mission Paul has been given. It is astonishing that Ananias could be reconciled to Paul. Only the work of the Holy Spirit, and Ananias's own obedience could account for such willingness. The mission of the church to the Gentiles is begun by Paul, but it is supported by those like Ananias who are called to other aspects of God's mission in the world.

The epistle passage for the fourth Sunday after Easter is from Revelation 7:9-17. It describes the worship of God by those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. It is clear that these are indeed the baptized who have now fulfilled faithfully the meaning of their baptism. They are from every tribe and nation, from all languages, which says something about the global character of the people of God. They have been faithful in spite of great opposition that they have faced, so it is clear that baptism did not give them the promise of an easy life. And now, this cosmopolitan gathering is worshipping at the throne of God. Mission includes the worship of God. In that sense,

the church is in mission when it gathers for worship. It is announcing to the world that God is Sovereign, that God is worthy of worship, and that there is no other who is to be worshipped. If visitors cannot tell that this is the chief reason for our gathering, then we have failed in an important aspect of our mission. Worship is the reaffirmation of the basis on which all else in mission and in our lives rests. It is the foundation. If we try to carry out mission in the world without worship as the constant reference, we will trivialize our mission or we will burn out in it. The missional character of worship is seen in the words of the institution of the Lord's Supper in I Corinthians 11:26: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

The Revelation text points to the end of hunger, tears, and thirst. God is concerned about such things, and such sufferings are not to continue. Of course that eschatological vision of the Kingdom leads to actions now that seek to end human misery. But the passage reminds us of two important things. First, ultimately it is God who will totally eliminate human suffering. It is beyond our human power. Second, though the task of feeding the hungry and the thirsty, of comforting the suffering, is a mission that will cease in the final glory, because there will be no need for it, the mission of worship will not cease then, but rather will be raised to a new level. Our worship now is part of the mission that is eternal.

The Gospel lesson for the fifth Sunday of Easter is from John 13:31-35: the commandment to love one another, so that all will know that we are Jesus' disciples. From other passages—especially I Corinthians 13—we know that like worship, love is forever, not destined to fall away when this age ends. To be baptized is to be called to love. To be the church is to be the community in which love dwells and is so obvious that even those outside the church can notice it. To love one another is part of our mission. It is the hallmark by which "everyone will know that you are my disciples." There are congregations where some members are clearly in mission to those outside. They are committed to social mission in an exemplary fashion. But if there is no love within the congregation, then the witness is severely blunted. The love for those outside needs to be an overflow from the love that burns within the community of faith. Yet the opposite is also true. The church cannot be ingrown, loving only its own members and ignoring the world outside. This text puts the two together: the love within the congregation is a sign to those outside. Love is to some degree for the sake of mission. It is part of the mission.

The passages that have been chosen as examples are from the Easter season, and the lectionary does not include Old Testament readings other than the psalms. Such an omission is an issue for another time. However, since the sense of being part of the people of God is continuous throughout the two testaments, the same interpretive possibilities would apply to Old Testament readings as well as New.

The Royal Priesthood

For the early church it was clear that baptism made one part of the royal priesthood. Following the baptism with water there was an anointing with oil, an anointing like that of the priests and kings of Israel. We have often lost sight of the fact that this common priesthood had enormous significance. To be a priest means that one is able to intercede for others, not only for other Christians, but even more for those who cannot pray for themselves because they do not know God, or because they are in such deep

distress that they cannot pray. Such intercessions are the prayers of the people. In the early church such prayers occurred after the unbaptized were dismissed, precisely because they were not yet part of the priesthood.

The prayers themselves are outside of the sermon itself, but strongly related to mission. Well done, the prayers of the people identify and pray for those to whom we need to be in mission. Such prayers prepare both us, the ones to whom we are sent, and the way to them. If there is a connection between the text which the sermon elucidates and the prayers of the people which follow, the sense of mission can flow directly from one to the other. By emphasizing the significance of baptism, and addressing the baptized in the sermon, the response of the baptized in the prayers of the people can be the beginning of mission.