

1 Corinthians 1:1-9
John 1:29-42

“Echoes”
1st Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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2nd Ordinary

Sometimes people have asked me what has surprised me most, in moving here from the West, in changing cultures, as it were. There are several things, but one of those has been this: here in Alabama I have felt less defensive about my faith. That may seem an odd thing for a Minister to say, but we feel most of the same things any layperson does. My experience is that in other parts of the country in which I have lived, fundamentalist Christians felt some sort of obligation to attack the rest of us and tell us we were going to hell. But here, they ignore me, I ignore them; and coexistence is the norm. Presbyterians and Episcopalians and Methodists have been here for so long that we are as much a part of the landscape as magnolias and crepe myrtle. On the other end, in other parts of the country the secular culture feels a need to condemn the Christian faith as being the source of all our problems, and it is a chore to convince them that one can be an open-minded, caring, intellectually curious person and be a follower of Jesus. But here in Alabama I have not had to make apologies for being a Christian and being a progressive thinker. That is an understood category here. I find that refreshing, and a lot easier to live with.

Lord knows, the Christian church has plenty to apologize for, throughout history, things which, in doing, we shamed Jesus Christ – the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, providing theological justification for slavery, narrow judgmental meanness of all kinds. There are folks in our own fellowship who are here because they are refugees from that kind of religion. If we wanted to start a Confession of Sin for all of it, we could be here until Thursday morning.

And yet, that’s too easy. The church isn’t Jesus Christ, it is the church - still a human institution (full of humans), on our better days doing the best we can. And whatever failings the church has, there are even more examples of ordinary heroism, day in and day out. Take this one small piece of the church, this congregation, which has to more or less the best of its ability found ways to house the homeless, feed the poor, care for families torn by AIDS, hold together marriages, raise children to be part of a community (in an individualistic and isolationist world), and provide a home for the spiritually beaten up. Around the world the Presbyterian denomination has not only led people to knowledge of Christ, but has provided medicine and education, nutrition and clean water where there was none before. A list that is at least as long as the list of our failings.

I am helped by Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. Corinth was a major seaport, with all the tawdry vices of Marseilles or Miami. We know from the letter that within the congregation they were conflicted, quarrelsome, self-centered and self-righteous. Not what you would expect from those called to be a covenant people. And yet, before he took them to task, the Apostle Paul writes our text for today: *“To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints...I give thanks for the grace of God given you in Christ Jesus...in every way you have been enriched in speech and knowledge...there is no spiritual gift you lack as you wait for the revealing of our Lord...”*

“Sanctified in Christ Jesus”, “called to be saints”, does not mean moral perfection. It means Jesus dwells in the middle of flawed humanity, even us. It means, imperfect sinners though we are, we are called to live a sanctified life in the middle of an desacralized world. It means flawed as we are, we are the ones here to speak forgiveness, and for grace, and for God. W.C. Coffin said that the Incarnation says as much about what we *are* to become as it does about what God *has* become.

Today we will come to the font and for the second week in a row baptize one of our children – this time, young Jane Earnhardt, into this flawed but holy church. And this celebration will be a little bit about Jane, and a little bit about her parents, a little bit about us, but mainly about Jesus Christ.

All through the first chapter of John, from whence comes our Gospel lesson for today, the Baptizer repeatedly says, “It’s not about me. It’s about *him*.” Our text today takes place the day after Jesus was baptized by John. And John says some interesting things. “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*” John, and even the Pharisees, had baptism and rites directed at repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but Jesus is the one who can universalize that, forgiveness to the sins of the whole world. (Even the church.) Why Lamb? John could be thinking of the Passover Lamb (Exodus 12) and blood on the doorposts, the scapegoat of Lev. 16, the Servant Lamb of Isaiah (chapter 53), the Lamb at the daily Temple sacrifices, the Paschal Lamb as reinterpreted by the Christian sacrament, the Eucharist. In any case, the Lamb sacrificed for us, who takes away sin (even the church’s, yes?), and is associated with Baptism.

And John the baptizer who saw the Spirit of God like a dove, settle on Jesus and remain on him. And why a dove? Is it the same Spirit who “brooded over the waters” in Genesis who now broods over the waters of the Jordan? Is it a callback to the dove Noah sent out, in the flood, who found dry land and safety and a future, who now settles on Jesus? A lamb, a dove, water, all sorts of symbolism. Presbyterians say that the sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace. So we assume that same Spirit will descend and settle on Jane (as if it had not already), and her life will be changed because of God’s care.

John pointed to Jesus: “Look! Here is the Lamb of God!” Andrew was one of two who went to get people to come and see this Lamb of God, and who he brought was his brother Peter. “*We have found the Messiah!*”, he said. And brought to see Jesus the one who would be the most pivotal of all the disciples. When Jesus said, “What are you seeking?” they answered with a question: “Where are you staying?”, which did not mean “What hotel are you at?” but is the word *μενών*, *menon*, meaning stay, abide, continue, endure, remain... that is – who is this Jesus? It is to ask, “What are you about?” A question one can spend a lifetime answering. Critics of the church can be factually right on, to where there’s no point in being argumentative or defensive. I am tempted to say, “You’re right, I’m a mess. But what about Jesus?”

At some point, though, our baptism and our seeking discipleship does bring responsibility back to us. How will we follow as disciples of Jesus, in such a way that there is an

increase in grace and love in this world? That has surely happened, generation upon generation, and we inherit the faith from those who have gone before us. As country songwriter Michael Murphey wrote: “I come from a long line of love.” Or Kristofferson: “Maybe Lord, I can show someone else what I went through myself, on my way back to you.”

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Lucy stumbled into Narnia, through a clothes closet and then invited her siblings to come experience what she experienced. Peter’s brother Andrew was the one called, and became the caller. Tomorrow we celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, a significant one for us in Alabama. How would we have gotten to civil rights in this country, as non-violently as we did, had it not been for the flawed and imperfect church, and its imperfect saints? King showed us where being a disciple of Christ Jesus required love and justice hand in hand, brought us to come and see the Messiah.

When we follow our calling we (as Fowler says) gradually bring the lived story of our lives into congruence with the core story of Christianityⁱ, the story of Christ Jesus and his love. You could make a list of the people in your life who are the saints in your own hagiography – the people who, in one way or another, over time, brought you to come and see what Jesus is about, where he stays in this world. Where would we be without them? Alasdair MacIntyre wrote: “*We enter upon a stage we did not design and find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making. Each of us being the main character in his/her own drama plays subordinate parts in the dramas of others, and each drama constrains the others.*”ⁱⁱ

It is a long line of love, the faith being passed on from one sanctified Christian to the next, Andrew to Peter, Corinthian to Roman, the saints in your life to you. And this room is full of them. We owe both the past and the future. God’s attempt at bringing us to life and love echoes down the years – from the waters of creation, echoes off the hull of Noah’s boat, echoes from the dripping water as Jesus rose from the Jordan, echoes from every baptismal font or pool through ages... echoes down into this room from the voices of the ones gone before who passed on faith and hope and love to us, all to this day when we baptize Jane in those same, yes very same, waters. And make promises to surround her with love and intention and care, so that she can live in grace and beauty on this earth, and pass down the ways of Jesus someday, to *her* children’s children.

Think of someone who passed the gift of faith to you. And when we baptize this newest saint, hold that other saint in your mind. Remember that person’s voice, and listen for its echo in these baptismal waters.

ⁱ Fowler, James *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, HarperCollins, New York, 1984, p.146

ⁱⁱ MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue*, U. of Notre Dame Press, 1981, p. 198