

Baptism of the Lord
ISAIAH 43:1-7
PSALM 29
ACTS 8:14-17
LUKE 3:15-17, 21-22
January 5, 2025

One Word Says It All!

The old Budweiser beer commercials used to end by boldly declaring that “when you say Budweiser, you’ve said it all!” Well, I really do not have a clue about the truth in that bold statement, but I can tell you that this slogan has been dancing in my head this week as I pondered this sermon for Baptism of the Lord today. As we know from our readings in the Gospels, the writers who penned their versions of the Jesus story seem to go out of their way to talk about Samaritans, a people group back in the day who were summarily, phonetic pun intended, marginalized by traditional Jews, and I think it fair to say, vice versa. We are more than familiar, call us literarily intimate, with the story called the “good Samaritan”, knowing full well the brilliant dialogue between Jesus and a Samaritan woman at a well, a religious debate that was both insightful and respectful. Yes, we know that Samaritans almost singularly were represented in the Gospels as the far reaches of diverse inclusivity. The long history between these two peoples, Jews and Samaritans, revealed the kind of tension that unfortunately happens between neighbors who have different, what appear to be more than contrasting or opposing, religious viewpoints. As we all know full well, there is nothing new about this kind of spiritual competition, conflicts arising between adversarial factions commonplace among so many religious enterprises.

As we celebrate Baptism of the Lord today, along with celebrating all our baptisms, and as we move further into this season after Pentecost, the lections chosen for these Sundays make us acutely aware of the extended reach of the gospel as it stretched beyond the comfortable confines of traditional Judaism as the hospitably welcoming and inclusive message of Jesus rapidly spread into gentile territories. I am not sure that we are able to fully grasp the radical

implications made by the ancient writers as they noted the accelerated expansion of the gospel including conversion stories of numerous diverse converts who found a religious home in a movement that initially was a Jewish sect not yet separated from its mother faith. But of all the various people groups that are mentioned in the Gospels as having been impacted by the profound preaching and teaching of Jesus, it is the invitation to Samaritans that would have still come across as a surprise if not a shock to those who saw this transformation and/or read these stunning reports.

So, we have heard for the umpteenth time the call of the gospel to hospitably welcome and include persons from all walks of life, the book of Acts a testimony naming numerous converts from various backgrounds. We read about Roman centurions, eunuchs, Gentiles of many stripes, reading and rereading their stories to perhaps a point at which we become too familiar, maybe a little numb to the cutting edge all these stories sought and seek to convey. So, what if we flip the script this morning, assuming we do not need another lecture, i.e., sermon, reminding us of the need to offer hospitable welcome and inclusion, perhaps pretending to a fair degree that we get it, that we understand fully this gospel mandate, yes, that we totally get it. Yes, assumptions are always dangerous! As we ponder our baptisms during this liturgical celebration, we are not only reminded of the sacred calling to reach beyond our walls, but we also need to take stock, to take note, of the fact that there had to be something so amazing and wonderful, so contagiously appealing, so seductive, that folks from so many perspectives, religious and civil, were drawn like moths to a flame to join this young fledgling movement as it emerged and evolved, developing ever so quickly. No one abandons their traditions, especially those of the religious variety, without discovering something to replace it that was so captivating that there was no other option than to sign on the dotted line, becoming a life member of said persuasion. The appeal of the gospel, the very gospel of Christ, was not just, and I say just in jest, was not just that it was extravagantly inviting, but that there seemed to be something new, fresh, and exciting about this movement. In all honesty, there was nothing new here as Jesus simply tapped into what had always been there, recovering the roots, leaning into the rock from which the ancient faith was hewn. Yes, it would be fair to call it a reformulation of the ancient faith, a reformation within Judaism that was simply

a revisioning of the ancient Jewish tradition. The content had been there all along, reclaimed by Jesus in his preaching and teaching, providing a much-needed spark, a zest, for life and living that went against the grain of a society mired in the malaise of religious oppression and Roman occupation. Yes, the gospel was a great escape, but it was so much more, something far deeper and lasting, far more meaningful, than a temporary fix, a short-termed high.

As we gather in this sacred space to do all the holy things we do, from worship to fellowship to mission, to care and compassion, one of our goals is to capture the imagination even hoping to define this thing called gospel. The baseline for our mission and ministry is to embody a place of invitation, a refuge of hospitable welcome and inclusion, that will get people in the door. But that is only a beginning, only a starting point. It is the content of the character of who we are as followers of Christ that seals the deal, yes, something about us as a collective and cohesive unit, a beloved congregation, that is more than appealing, but is alluring in the most attractive way possible. People today are looking for, are longing for, a sense, and yes, thus a place, of belonging, authentic, genuine community where they can be, according to their dictate of conscience, who they are, a safe space, yes, safe sanctuary, where they can be themselves. In the climate we now live this, call it a commodity though that kind of cheapens the idea, is extremely rare, very hard to find. So much religion today continues to contain a whole lot of fine print, rules and regulations demanding conformity, the kind of consistency that saps the human spirit, that diminishes the human capacity to create and evolve. In other words, so many systems are designed as one size fits all, the goal being to produce exact replicas of whatever standard has been deemed true and beyond question. Yes, we hold to some very key values, but we never discourage free expression, not our style, a tension of which we are always acutely aware as we engage church together.

So, one of the questions raised by a simple line from the book of Acts once again mentioning the primacy of the role of Samaritans in the gospel story, is a question pondering just what it was that other than being invited, compelled them to become a part of a community, the majority of whom surely had once despised, labeled, and ostracized Samaritans as being the other, as inferior, not a complementary category. Yes, surely it began as a matter of trust, but there had

to be more, so much more! Surely, they saw something, they felt something, they experienced something, something unlike anything that had ever come their way before. And for more than one hundred years, to the best of our ability, this local missional church, the beloved faith community called the First Congregational United Church of Christ has sought to keep up with those first century Joneses, to be a place, to invoke the words from the Cheers theme song, “where everybody knows your name!” May we continue to be and ever more become a sacred space, a sanctuary, that is as alluring as it is appealing, a place where the gracious love of God is manifest every time we gather, a church that lives up to the billing that it now proudly proclaims as an Open and Affirming congregation, yes, for all the Samaritans of the world and everybody else, none excluded. May it be so! Amen!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and has blessed us with a community of love and grace, a place we long to share with any who are searching! Amen and amen!