

“Our Model for Servant Leadership”

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

There was a baptism this week. It didn't follow the Presbyterian, *Book of Order*, because it did not use the Trinitarian formula: in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—nor was there a baby involved or a profession of faith.

It was a baptism of our apartment.

It began with a fire alarm and involved many buckets to catch the water overflow from a burst pipe in an apartment above ours. Water leaked in on half of our apartment from every place of least resistance... such as through the ceiling fire alarms, overhead air vents, and all light fixtures.

In the baptism liturgy in the *Book of Common Worship*, we are reminded that God nourishes and sustains us by water, that the Israelites were led through the waters into freedom, that Jesus himself was baptized by water.

But when water is pouring into your home in such a way that you have to move furniture and unplug all the electronics, you aren't very romantic about water cleansing, purifying, refreshing, and restoring. No, it's not until a day or two later, when the carpets are being dried out by a small army of fans and dehumidifiers that you get your sense of humor back and realize you had a flood the week before the church celebrates the Baptism of the Lord Sunday.

Our lectionary passages this morning reflect what we celebrate when we spend time each year on Jesus' baptism: while he was fully divine, he was also fully human, humbly participating in the life of the faith community. When we understand that Jesus is both set apart and yet one with us, we claim what baptism does in our own lives—marks us as part of God's covenant, chosen and adopted by God; chosen, adopted, and *called* to serve others.

When Jesus is baptized by John, he does so because it fulfills all righteousness—it is what God wants. In Jesus, God wanted to become one with us, not only giving us an example in Jesus but to connect with us deeply. The Divine Creator at one with the created.

As Paul summarizes this in his letter to the Philippians: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:5-8).

When Jesus comes to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him, John knows Jesus is sinless. John's baptism is a baptism of repentance—a cleansing that represents forgiveness of sins. John knows Jesus is without sin; and yet Jesus, in humility and unity with us, is baptized.

Baptism for us comes with a calling. When we baptize babies, we do so with the covenant promise of the parents to bring the child up to know Jesus' love. We covenant as a congregation to be an example of Jesus' love to that child and to model maturity of faith. All of these promises are with the hope that that infant will grow up hearing the stories of God and learning to love Jesus, eventually making a personal testimony in the form of profession of faith and then living that faith out in a context of service and stewardship.

Today, we have officer installation. These folks who you have elected to serve as the spiritual leaders of this congregation are living out their commitment of faith in Christ Jesus. Last Sunday, as part of officer training we read together the definition in the Book of Order of Elders and Deacons.

Deacons: “The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress. Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly and sisterly love, sincere compassion, and sound judgment should be chosen for this ministry.” (PCUSA’s Book of Order, G-2.0201)

Elders: “Congregations should elect persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit. Ruling elders are so named not because they “lord it over” the congregation (Matt. 20:25), but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. Ruling elders, together with teaching elders, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church, including ecumenical relationships.” (PCUSA’s Book of Order, G-2.0301)

These are tall definitions of what it means to be an officer—we reflected last week that it’s probably good folks were nominated *before* we were reminded of these words, right?—to lead exemplary lives full of love, encouraging the members of the community to service and care of those in need. As much as the deacons might like to be the party-planners or as much as elders might want to rule over the congregation, elders and deacons are set forth as spiritual leaders, nurturing the congregation into more service and mission in Jesus Christ.

When I asked those who were already serving and those who were elected to serve what skills one would need to be a good elder or deacon, they named such things as having faith, commitment and good communication skills—people who would lead by example and believe being an officer is a call to do God’s work.

Then we looked at Scripture passages where other people were called to serve God—Abraham and Sarah leaving their people to follow God, Moses leading the people out of Egypt, prophets and early church leaders. Then we talked about what things were important in those call stories: trust, listening, obedience, gratitude, recognition of God, nonjudgmental love for others.

The official offices of elder and deacon as we know them are not in the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus didn't name elders and deacons out of the apostles. The best definition we have of them from Scripture is in Acts 6. The disciples were devoting themselves to prayer. They were preaching and encouraging the growing number of believers, teaching them as Jesus had taught and healing people. They were basically serving as what we understand ruling elders to be.

But then the people started to complain that their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. These so-understood elders called a meeting: “It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait on tables.” (Acts 6:2) And they hatched a plan to name those who were full of the Spirit and wisdom to help oversee the care of the people. And thus, something like our modern-day deacon was born.

More than any definition from the Book of Order or biblical understanding of what it means to be an elder or deacon, though, being a church officer—or really all of us as disciples of Jesus—is a calling to follow in Jesus' footsteps. We are set apart, as Isaiah reflects, to be a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to usher in freedom to those who are oppressed, to faithfully bring forth justice.

In Jesus' baptism, the Spirit of God descends like a dove upon him, and God speaks from the heavens, claiming Jesus as Beloved. Jesus, who emptied himself to become one with us, is the beloved. Jesus, who humbled himself, is the beloved. May we, too, learn to empty ourselves in service. May we, too, learn to humble ourselves, understanding our call to love and grace. In Jesus' name. Amen!