

*Sunday after Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord*

*January 7, 2018*

What do you want in life? That's a good question for us to consider. In fact, I am tempted to sit down and let us all reflect on our answers for the next few minutes in place of the sermon... But since I have a head start on thinking about it as I prepared for preaching today, I will go ahead and fill the silence.

What do we want in life? Our first response might be something obvious—perhaps tickets to the National Championship game at Mercedes Benz stadium. Or perhaps a Mercedes Benz. But most of us realize that is not enough answer for that big of a question. Experiences, no matter how memorable, and material things, no matter how grand, are not enough to define our lives. Though two tickets for tomorrow would be nice...

What do we want in life? Jesus asked questions similar to this at different times in his ministry. Like early in the Gospel according to John, when two disciples of John the Baptist started to follow him. Jesus turned around and asked them, "What are you looking for?" They replied, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" and Jesus told them, "Come and see" (John 1:38).

In Mark's version of the Gospel, later in Jesus' public ministry, a blind beggar named Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus for mercy. The crowd around the man told him to be quiet, but as he continued to cry out, Jesus had the man brought to him and asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:46-51).

Jesus asked these types of questions so that people would say out loud what they wanted in life. And so it is with us. What do we want in life? When we take time to reflect on it, our deepest answers fall into two broad categories. One response is the desire for meaning: what is the purpose of our life? Those are the types of questions that we kicked around over coffee or beer when we were younger; and those types of questions have a way of coming back to us over the course of our lives.

The other response is about connection. Humans are social animals. We need to feel a sense of belonging to a group that knows us and loves us; and that we in turn can know and love. Speaker and author Brene Brown says that connection is a primary human need. If we are not connected, then we can become lost and act out in various ways that harms ourselves and others—things like further and further withdrawal from society; addiction; even violence.

Now in the Christian faith in general, and on this day in particular when we remember and celebrate our Lord's Baptism, we see how those two answers come together. We Christians believe there is a purpose to life—and that purpose has to do with connection. A foundation of our faith-- what we just celebrated during Christmas-- is that God became one of us. God became human in Jesus and connected with all of us in all that it means to be human.

Throughout his life, we see evidence of that deep connection. In today's Gospel, Jesus joined the line with sinners, outcasts, and tax collectors in order to be baptized by John the Baptist. This may be a surprise if we think about it, since the church teaches that Jesus was perfect. But his perfection was not a barrier to his ability to connect with his contemporaries—and with us. He did not hold his nose or

judge the other people in line to be baptized. He joined in because he identified with them and loved them.

Now Jesus' baptism was unique. The heavens, we're told, were torn apart, and a voice from heaven said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus, himself, was unique. But that message Jesus heard from heaven is a message he carried with him for others—"We are all beloved of God and with us God is well pleased."

Jesus proclaimed that message by word and deed in his public ministry and his willingness to love others even unto the cross. And Jesus charged his followers—including all of us-- with sharing that message, too. Our faith and baptism and our common life and ministry proclaim that we are connected to one another by God's love for all of us.

So that is how we answer, "What do we want in life?" Our answer to that question inspires us as we wake up every morning and over time transforms us as individuals and as communities of faith. As we learn that God loves us and as we learn to love one another in community, we learn there is more involved in this answer. Over time, what we believe challenges us to connect with people beyond our church community, even if they never become members of our church.

You see, Christianity is not about being part of a club, even a really good club. Rather it is realizing that God is doing something that is bigger than us—bigger than our congregation, our denomination, even our religion. God invites us to be part of God's work. The word Paul used for this understanding of our faith is "reconciliation."

When we proclaim God's love to the world and live it out in our community, people will notice and some will be drawn to be in relationship with us. Some will join the church and that is good. Others will not. They may have their own faith or remain skeptical about any faith. But our part is to reach out and connect-- to respect them and stay open to what God is doing.

So what will this look like practically?

Some of the examples we know include our work with Family Promise and the Children's Center at Lee Arrendale State Prison. I know I mention these ministries a lot in sermons and conversations. I do because I believe they are important—for the work we take part in and for the way it transforms us as individuals and as a community over time.

These types of connections are outside of our comfort zone. They are outside the comfort zones of the people we serve, too! No one wants to be homeless; but the people we serve through Family Promise are reaching out to connect with folks who can help them get back on their feet and in a home. No one wants to be in prison; but the mothers we serve at the Children's Center at Lee Arrendale State Prison want to stay connected with their children so they can maintain relationships that are so important for mother and children. Our work helps them to do that.

So as we come alongside the people we serve, it is not simply doing good—it is being in relationship with someone in a quiet, loving way and learning from them and their life stories. We do practical things like making meals and making crafts. Those are important. But it is really about connecting with people in a deeper way.

Connecting will not always lead to feel good stories. Jesus connected with his disciples and with people who needed healing. He also connected with those who opposed him and eventually conspired to kill him. That is why he could say from the cross, “Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.” Jesus lived what he taught us, “Love your enemies.”

So what does that mean for us? We need to remember we are connected with one another. Many are very different from us. Refugees from Burma and Syria. Immigrants from Central America. The poor and the marginalized. The rich and powerful. The disagreeable. Through our faith in Christ and our baptism, we believe we are all connected. If we believe that, we can learn to be open to people all around the world and just across the street.

In today’s world, this can be a problem. It has become hard for us to connect outside of our groups. In his lecture at Emory, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry proclaimed that what we need is a revolution of relationships. When we are sure we are right and the other person is wrong, we need to pause and make space for each other. Now to be clear, from God’s perspective, there is a right and wrong—everything is not relative. The enemies of Jesus were wrong. But we can learn how to remove barriers to being connected, regardless of who is right.

As Christians, we have some tools we can use to do this. One is forgiveness. It is at the center of our faith. We believe God in Christ forgives us and calls us to forgive others. We say that in the Lord’s Prayer. We see how Jesus practiced forgiveness all the way to the cross. If he could practice forgiveness even then, by God’s grace we can learn to practice forgiveness, too.

How we forgive matters. We do not need to go up to people with whom we disagree and say, “I forgive you for being wrong.” That’s not helpful. Instead we can forgive as we pray for people who have hurt us. And when our words, actions, or attitudes have harmed others, we will want to ask for forgiveness. Asking for forgiveness can go a long way in helping us connect with others. Sometimes it will lead the other person to ask for our forgiveness, too.

Another way to connect is to really listen to a person and their point of view. We may strongly disagree with them—but with God’s help we can learn to resist reacting and fighting. Instead, we can acknowledge that we heard them. That goes a long way in a relationship. We can be honest and say we see things differently and maybe even explain why. Our respectful honesty, even when we disagree, can lead to better, more real connections with people.

So, what do we want in life? It is more than things and experiences. What we really want in life is to be connected to God and to one another through the grace of Jesus Christ; and through that connection to be transformed so that we become more and more like Jesus. That is what we want. That is what really matters in life and gives our lives meaning. Amen.