

Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22 "Next!" Rev. Janet Chapman 1/9/22

Richard Hagberg, former executive consultant for many Silicon Valley companies, told a story about a very well-known CEO of a large company who was having a difficult time waiting in line at the DMV. He was frustrated at how long it was taking, apparently he had failed to make an appointment, and started grumbling to his wife, "Don't they know who I am?" She replied, "Yeah, you're a plumber's son who got lucky!"

Did you notice who else is having to wait in line according to our scripture? Luke 3 says, "And when all the people were baptized, and Jesus also was baptized." What a strange thing to say...when everybody was being baptized, Jesus was also baptized. The renowned Rev. Dr. Fred Craddock, one of our greatest preachers, took great offense at this approach. After all, he says, "Luke knew the gospel author Mark; he should have said it simply as Mark did, as though there were only two people in the world at that time, John & Jesus, John baptized Jesus with heaven's approval. That would be the way to do it." Something dramatic and momentous, you know? Not "and when all the people were baptized, Jesus also had been baptized..." Jesus also? Matthew would never say a thing like that. In fact, Matthew has John looking down the line, and here comes Jesus to wait and he immediately calls Jesus out of the crowd, out of line, and says "Whoa, whoa, I'm not going to baptize you, you should baptize me. It must be the other way around." But Jesus says, "Leave it alone, just do what's right, what God wants." It is a very different way to say it that what we see in Luke. An early church father named Epiphanius records the incident as he heard that when Jesus baptized, there was a bright light from heaven that shone upon the surface of the water. We know that Jerome, church historian and translator, said he had heard that when Jesus was baptized, fire spread across the surface of

the Jordan River. That is the way to tell about Jesus' baptism for this is no ordinary person. At least Luke could say, "John told Jesus, oh no, not with the rest of them. When I get through with the crowd, then we'll have a special private service for you; you are different." But Luke didn't. "And when all the people were baptized, and Jesus also." It sounds like a line at the DMV, everybody just standing around waiting for their turn, and there's John at the edge of the water, saying "Next," and here comes Jesus.

I don't know about you, but I am not a fan of lines. My family will tell you that my hatred of lines has made me forego many a ride at Disneyland, Universal, or Six Flags. I don't like lines at the DMV, or fast food restaurants, or the pharmacy, or any of that. In lines, everybody just sort of seems the same. I'm far happier watching people in lines – look at all those people! Where did they come from? Who are they? Truth be told, most of us know how to create lines really well; it is a specialty of our culture. There is one line for those who make over \$100K a year and another for those who make less; there is a line for those who live in gated communities and another for those who live in trailer parks; there is a line for the clergy and one for the laity; one for the famous and one for the commoner; one for those who own and there's a line for those who rent. We know how to make lines, don't we?

However, Craddock points out that Luke really doesn't know how to make lines. Luke gives us the impression that it's all just one line. "Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized." One line of rich and poor, fancy and plain, young and old and so on. Jesus' baptism takes place in a community of many others, all sort of folks. It is not a private occurrence which reminds us all that when we are baptized, we become part of a new social world. In this world of growing isolation, the longing for community has intensified. The

church is one place community is found. The baptism of Jesus is with quote “all the people” unquote. Maybe the church sometimes forgets this important reality. Jesus presented himself for baptism as an act of solidarity with a nation and a world of sinful people. Jesus simply got in line with everyone who had been broken by the “wear and tear” of this selfish world and had all but given up on themselves and their God. When the line started to form of downtrodden and heart-sick people, coming with the hopes of a new beginning through a return to God, Jesus joined them. He joined the line of the damaged who needed God and he also was baptized with them – this is worth knowing and remembering.

The specifics on why all those people showed up is not revealed. We don’t know why they came but they came... maybe they were searching like the rich young ruler, who asked, “Rabbi, what should I do to inherit eternal life?” Maybe they just came from the doctor’s office, having unloaded all their symptoms, “Doc, it starts here in my chest and shoots out into my arms and I have to sit up in my La-Z-Boy to get my breath and to get any sleep. What do you think it is, Doc? Do you think it’s serious?” Maybe they were going down the street and some kids grabbed at their sleeves begging for money, “Can we have a nickel, a dime, a quarter, mister, could we please?” “Get away from me kids, you’re getting my clothes dirty.” And he walked into his home just in time to hear his spouse say, “I don’t know how to get our kids to eat; they are just so picky,” as she scrapes plates of food into the disposal. And he is just sick of it; it’s no way to live. We don’t know why they came, but they did. Even ironically, the clergy came; that is rather strange, isn’t it? The clergy came for the baptism. Along the way, they forgot something, their baptism. I understand that because I might have been in that line as well. You can be in the ministry so long that you begin to get used to things like sanctuaries and

tables and banners and bulletins. You just get used to it. And a niggling voice says, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days came when you said, 'I've lost all my appetite for life.'" And the years carry on, the clouds return after the rain, and people say, "Whatever happened to Rev. So-and-so?" And the answer's clear; she just got used to it, couldn't see it anymore, couldn't hear it anymore. The condition is called ennui or apathy." Most surprising is that Luke said there were Roman soldiers in line, in line to be baptized. They represented the power of Rome. They had blood on the tips of their swords and bragged about it. When they put on their armor, the power of Rome was present. I thought of this on the first anniversary of the insurrection last week and how many touted their power on that fateful day at our National Capitol, their weapons and their riot gear screaming, "We are the power." Yet, even when they take off those pieces of armor, if they ever do, and stand in line for baptism, they will be like every other mother's son or daughter, trembling in fear of death. So there are the soldiers of power, standing in line for baptism.

I wonder where Jesus stood in that line? Was he among the clergy? Maybe he was with the poor? He could have been among the rich; he went to the homes of the rich. Can you see Jesus standing among the soldiers, clad in riot gear? And John shouts to each of them, "Next, next." But this is Jesus we're talking about! I remember being in a dinner line once in Selma; our church had prepared the meal for the unsheltered, something we did in partnership with other churches, and was serving it to those who had come on that cold December evening. There was nothing for me to do until after the meal so I took my turn in waiting in line for a plate. I had been working outside in the garden before coming to help and I looked pretty disheveled as I waited with the rest. The server rang out again and again, "Next, next" as we all

approached the serving window. I sat with a small group of folks who had come by themselves. I asked where folks were from – one shared he had lived in Sacramento for many years, used to have a really good job, then lost it to the bottle; lost his house, his family, his marriage, everything and so here he was on the streets of Selma. He asked where I was from? I said here in Selma, but long ago, I was from Oregon. “What do you do?” he asked. “I’m a minister,” I replied. He looked surprised, “I didn’t know women could do that?” Then looking around, he said, “I guess the problems of life can get to all of us, can’t they? It doesn’t matter who we are or what we do, we can all end up here on the food line, huh?” I bristled and wanted to correct his assumption, telling him he was only getting a meal because my church, of which I was the minister, decided to help this sorry lot out. I’m not like them!” But I didn’t, because it wouldn’t have been true. It wouldn’t have been true at all. Jesus stood in that line to remind us once and for all that it doesn’t matter whether you’re at the peak of a successful career or you’re just waiting for the next welfare check to arrive; in a sense, it’s all the same. The invitation into the realm of God is quite simple. A voice says, “Next!” And we remember.