

## Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

The instructions generally for the celebration of baptism say that the homilist should actually *preach* about baptism. Two weeks ago, many of you heard my input on baptism in general. But I think today's Scriptures – with their messages of action, encounters, and inclusion - take us directly to the baptismal covenant which we will all renew today – the covenant into which Andy and Jordan, and Mackenzie and Justin, are entering today on Benjamin's behalf.

The first part of what is labeled as “The Baptismal Covenant” is comprised of faith statements. I ask, “Do you believe?” and you respond with parts of the Apostles Creed. But the next series of questions moves that faith into action – which is exactly what the letter from James prompts us to do, yes? The questions all begin, “Will you...?” We've moved from what we believe to what we will do about that. “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?” By word and example – by what we say and do. In other words, it's no longer a matter of keeping our ‘faith,’ or what we believe, to ourselves. We are promising action here. We can hear the echo of that letter from James: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works?”

The next question is this: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” This is about getting our hands dirty, about putting rubber to the road, about walking the talk, or whatever other euphemism you choose. Mostly it is about encounter. We cannot serve those we don't encounter. Look at the second story in today's gospel. “They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him.” Just touch him, that's all they wanted. Jesus could have done that and kept walking. But we're told that Jesus took him aside in private, was with him one-on-one, put his fingers in his ears, spat and touched his tongue. And the man was restored, his tongue was freed, his ears open. He could communicate again and be part of his community – after that personal interaction, that *encounter* which Jesus initiated.

“Will you *seek and serve*.” I think this question gently prods us into seeing that living out our baptismal covenant is not simply about “being good” in our day to day lives. The invitation is to SEEK and serve, to dare to engage in the one-to-one interactions that we might easily avoid. It is one thing to serve Christ when we see him; it is another to seek Christ out in persons and places we might not expect.

The opening lines of today’s gospel passage tell us “Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre...” That is significant, because he was entering the land of Gentiles, non-Jews. He went out of his way to go there – a three-day walk from Galilee where he usually hung out. And there he encounters the woman “of Syrophenician origin.” She was a woman, she was a Gentile, and she spoke to him, which – as a woman – she should not have done. This is the first time, in Mark’s Gospel, that Mark has a Gentile approaching Jesus. She was “the other” in all sorts of ways. Yet Jesus engages with her, although it did not start out well. She is asking him to heal her daughter, and Jesus’s reply indicates that he sees his mission as one to his own people, the Jews. The account of this story in Matthew’s gospel even adds that line: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” In both versions, though, Jesus says, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” What an insult! “But even dogs get the scraps, the crumbs, the leftovers,” she tells him. As one commentator put it, “Jesus handed her a put down, and she tossed him a metaphor of inclusion.” - Many scripture scholars look on this passage as a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. The encounter between Jesus and this Syrophenician woman changes both of them. Jesus’s mission is now for *all* people. And this takes us to the last question in the Baptismal Covenant: “Will you strive for justice and peace among *all* people, and respect the dignity of *every* human being?”

Action, encounters, inclusion. We’re called to these. We promise to engage in these things, with God’s help. The opportunities for us to practice these are many. And we *do* practice them. Look around you – and think of all the ways you and your brothers and sisters gathered here live out your baptismal covenant: proclaiming the good news in word and example, seeking and serving Christ in *all* persons, striving, *working* for justice and peace and respecting the dignity of all. Look around you – and look beyond, to all those others who have passed from our sight but who are present with us in that communion of saints in which we profess belief.

This is the family into which we welcome Benjamin Timothy Brockman this morning, and I have no doubt that his grandfather Tim and all the other members of the family who worshiped here through the years are celebrating this baptism with us. Benjamin's baptismal gown, passed down through generations, is a symbol of lived faith passed down to each of us.

It is the lived faith we heard expressed in Isaiah's words:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

It is faith in a God who, as we sang in the psalm:

"gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger.  
who sets the prisoners free; opens the eyes of the blind; \*  
and lifts up those who are bowed down;  
who cares for the stranger; and sustains the orphan and widow, but frustrates the way of the wicked."

We are a part of all that – giving justice and food and freedom and care to all those in need. Because we are baptized into Christ – and thus become the body of Christ. God's justice and care and liberation and mercy now come through us – because Christ has no body now but ours. So let us pray that we might be faithful in living out the covenant we make and renew today, and support one another in living out that covenant of faith, even as we have been – and continue to be - supported by those who have gone before us.

Amen.

[Isaiah 35:4-7a](#) [Psalm 146](#) [James 2:1-10, \[11-13\], 14-17](#) [Mark 7:24-37](#)