



University Christian Church – Austin

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Beyond John's Baptism

Acts 19:1-7

Epiphany 1, b, January 11, 2009

It's good to be back with you here in Austin at the beginning of this new here. I will always be thankful to Kim Campbell and the rest of you who picked up responsibilities that would otherwise have been mine in order to allow Becca and me time in Florida for New Years.

As for most of you, there was a big part of our time in Florida that was simply enjoying being together as family. But there was one important, special aspect to this journey. You know that my father passed away six months ago and at that time his earthly remains were cremated. On December 30 about 35 folks including my mother, sisters, nieces and nephews, family friends, relatives from as far away as New York City all gathered on the dock of Lake Kerr in the Ocala National Forest that had been the center of Dad's universe all his life. It was his *axis mundi*...that special place, that liminal place that theologians and cultural anthropologists name as an axis of the world, where earth and heaven somehow meet.

We held short little memorial service in which we shared some reflections on Dad's life and then I read from my Dad's Dad's Jewish prayer book and I reminded those gathered whether they were Christians or Jews- as all Dad's family

of origin is Jewish- that we held in common a faith, a belief that the essence of a human being is not bound to a physical body, that we all affirm the importance of the Spirit and believe in an afterlife that is wonderful and eternal.

Then my brother-in-law, David, and I took Dad's cremains in Dad's old boat out into the lake a ways and scattered them there. And as we all looked on, Dad's earthly body's white ashes sank into the calm, clear water of his beloved Lake Kerr....and all kinds of associations sprang to my mind.

Among them was the recognition that this was another form of a baptism experience, another fresh start, another new beginning for Dad, and for all of us. Death is a transition to something mysterious, but so much better.

And I thought about how often at this particular place – this big bowl of water and the land it touched- this place, had been the site of so many of our lives' baptisms and blessings, going back to my grandmother's father first finding this spot nearly 100 years ago.

Another remembrance arose in my mind, probably because of the centrality of water that day and because of the nearness of death. It was the passage was from Romans 6,

3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Lake Kerr is only about 40 miles from the University of Florida where Dad attended college. All his life he was a loyal part of the gator nation, so he would have rejoiced in Thursday evening's national college football championship that Florida earned. Interestingly, Dad grew up in south Georgia and that would have been a natural place for him to go to school, but my bet was always that he ended up in Florida because of his love for that lake.

So I found it all the more ironic on Thursday evening when the University of Florida gators quarterback, Tim Tebow, the one nicknamed "Superman," showed up for the game with a curious message in that war paint football players put on before a game. You know the stuff I mean. Usually it is an extremely dark color, typically black. I am told that it is to keep light from reflecting off the sweaty face back into one's eye, but I've always believed it was psychological war paint worn to terrorize opponents. But Tebow's war paint was different. Underneath his right eye over the black paint was written in white the word "John" and under his left eye written in white on the black war paint was "3:16." Clever, wasn't he?

Do you remember the guy who always used to appear in the end zones of the professional football games with the huge John 3:16 sign? I don't know what happened to him but Tebow managed to get the same word out in a new fashion. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Tebow's parents were missionaries in the Philippines when he was born, and he has held a lifelong, strong, conservative Christian faith.ⁱ Tebow returned to the Philippines each of the 3 summers before he enrolled at Florida to support his father's ministry there. 2 years ago in an interview, Tebow's pastor, Jerry Vines of First Baptist Church in Jacksonville, said "Tebow is up for his future challenges at the University of Florida. There is great pressure in college football," Vines said.

“I believe Tim Tebow has been spiritually prepared by his family to handle that pressure. Of course, the difficulties will be there. But I am confident he will maintain his Christian ideals in the college football arena and will lead many others to a personal faith in Jesus Christ.”ⁱⁱ

“Lead many others...” John 3:16 “For God so loved the world....so that everyone who believes in him....” It is a beloved verse, a cherished verse, a central statement of confidence for the Christian; but more often than not through the entire history of Christianity, it has been used as a weapon to coerce, or as a tool to push for conversion of those who hold different religious views, especially when paired with the John 3:18 which reads, “Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

Throughout his life – like most of the Jewish people I know - my Dad was the object of many of those conversion attempts: to move him toward a Christian version of repentance, confession, and baptism. And no doubt the very hardest attempts for him to absorb were the conversion attempts made by some of his closest friends and by myself when I was in college. Like most of those who are out seeking to convert believers of other faiths to Christianity, I naïvely believed that the expression of faith in John 3:16 was the common, united voice of all the Christian faith.

How I now wish that someone had set me down and taught me as a young Christian that there have always been varieties of Christian ways to understand faithfulness to God.... Not all of them require believing in Jesus, or even thinking that appropriate; just believing in the God and the coming kingdom of God, to which Jesus pointed.

How I now wish someone had shown me that in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus does not claim to have graduated from His Jewish upbringing. Jesus does not repudiate Judaism or set aside any part of the Jewish law. In fact the Gospel of Matthew makes Jesus the Jewish Superman, a figure of such dramatic historical importance precisely because he was the finest teacher of the Jewish Law!ⁱⁱⁱ

How I now wish that I had been wise enough to leave my father alone after having witnessed my Christian faith to him; after sharing with him what I had discovered in my own experiments with Truth; and then simply allow him the dignity to respond to God in a way that made sense to him. That would have been a far more hospitable Christian witness than the one that I gave... or the one Tebow gave... or the one that most One Way, finger pointing, Christians give.

But our passage this morning calls not to dwell on the mistakes or the short sightedness of the past, but to reassess where we are today and to move forward! Our passage this morning brings to mind a similar time in the life of the young Christian church. We have in the book of Acts some of the earliest records of how it is that a Christian message was transmitted from Jesus through the early apostles to that first generation of believers.... And we can see quickly that there were wide variations of belief and understanding among those who called themselves Christians.

19:1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples.

2 He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

3 Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism."

4 Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus."

At this point in the story, the ball is in the court of the disciples. It is in their power to accept or to reject or to modify this new witness of Paul. We know how it turns out...

5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

But what if they had decided not to receive this new witness from Paul as true for them? What if they had decided to hear out Paul, but not to accept his teaching?

One hopes that Paul would trust that his witness shared would bear its proper fruit in the proper time and would have not badgered these novice disciples. The history of Christian witnessing generally is usually so kind.

This business of sharing our faith is never as easy as simple or as straightforward as we might wish. We might well ask:

“What extra does baptism in the Holy Spirit call forth from us?”

This is a relevant question for every Christian, but it is particularly relevant to a group of young people here who will begin preparations for their own baptisms on Easter in classes that start in three weeks. Unlike the new disciples in this passage from Acts, our young Christians are quite unlikely to speak in tongues and prophesy after they are baptized, but surely one of the claims that we do want to make is that they may well be infused in a special way with the Holy Spirit through their baptisms, after their public commitment of their faith, after a serious study of what it means to be a Christian.

How will this effect their sharing of their faith with others?

My hope is that they - and all the rest of us - come to a faith that is strong enough to help them make good & wise personal decisions;

But that never lets them get too comfortable with their current understanding and thus challenges them to grow every single of their lives;

My hope is that they and all the rest of come to a faith that we hold as our own best, personal understanding of Truth, and that we are excited to share what we have experienced with others when God provides an opportunity;

But also a faith that never stops listening to the Truth that others also perceive;

That never narrowly claims that we have found the only way to God, the only real Truth. For that claim -that exclusivistic claim - smacks of the Greek sin of sins, *hubris*, overweening pride, overwhelming self-confidence, thinking far too much of our own ability to know the parameters of God.

Let God be the judge of what finally is Truth.

Let us, instead of playing judge, let us show forth the compassionate love of God to all by sharing our willingness to share Good News, but never imposing it.

Amen.

ⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Tebow

ⁱⁱ <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=22513>

ⁱⁱⁱ RSV Matt. 5: 17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.