

January 12, 2020 Baptism of Jesus Sunday
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 29
Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17

Lines from *The Two Popes*. Letter from Pastor Ingrid Rasmussen, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Minneapolis, dates 12-16-19.

Grace and peace to you, beloved in Christ Jesus. Amen.

On this Baptism of Jesus Sunday,

the words that have caught my attention are about being witnesses to Christ.

They are in our reading from Acts, where we hear the tail end of one of the most important stories in the Bible: Peter and Cornelius have been led into conversation by the Holy Spirit.

Peter (who had always believed that the way to Jesus is through the Jewish tradition) is face to face (by the Holy Spirit's doing) with Roman, Gentile, not-at-all-Jewish Cornelius.

Back and forth they go, Cornelius and Peter, witnessing and learning.

In the end, they are changed by that spirited exchange.

Peter exclaims, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality."

The Jewish believers are welcome in this brand-new community of Jesus,

and so are the gentiles like Cornelius and his family.

As you can imagine, this has been an important passage in the ELCA's movement to welcome and include LGBTQ folks.

Perhaps it is in the conversations of our United Methodist kin, as well.

In the section we heard today Peter rehearses the whole story of Jesus' ministry:

his baptism,

the spreading message and the healing,

Jesus' death and his resurrection,

even the Peter's surprising epiphany about Cornelius and the gentiles: that God shows no partiality,

that Peter—in his very being—has been changed by the Spirit's power.

We are witnesses, Peter says: We are witnesses to all that Jesus did.

In the relationship, in the back and forth, we, like Peter, like Cornelius: we are changed.

We are witnesses to Jesus' power.

Over the holidays I watched the movie The Two Popes.

It's an imagined dialogue between Pope Benedict and the current pope, Pope Francis.

The film envisions how these two men, who are nearly polar-opposites, *might* have influenced each other, and how the Catholic Church *could* have been shaped through their dialogue.

At the height of the sex abuse scandal, Cardinal Bergoglio (the Argentinian Cardinal who later takes the name Pope Francis) asked to retire from his position as a Cardinal.

Benedict summons Cardinal Bergoglio to Rome and a funny, feisty conversation unfolds as they wander through the gardens of the Pope's summer residence.

Benedict dressed very pope-ly, Bergoglio dressed quite simply, utterly different men,

Bergoglio's explains his hoped-for resignation.

"It seems to me," Bergolia says, "our church is moving in directions I can no longer condone, or not moving at all when the time demands movement.

It seems to me that we are no longer part of this world.

We don't belong to it. We aren't connected."

In the film's imagination, Benedict pushes back on Cardinal Bergoglio,

reminding him how years earlier, when Bergoglio was the leader of the Jesuits in Argentina,

he had all the books on Marxism removed from the library;

how he required that the seminarians dress always in the cassocks, even in the vegetable garden;

how he claimed hard doctrinal lines.

"You were not unlike me," Benedict notes.

"No." Bergoglio confirms, but then he adds: "I changed"

"No, you compromised," Pope Benedict challenges.

"No, I changed. It's a different thing.... Life, the life he gave us, is all change."

"Nothing" Bergoglio points out, "is static in nature or the universe. Not even God."

"God does not change!" Benedict booms.

"Yes, [God] does," Cardinal Bergoglio says, "[God] moves toward us."

"Where should we find him," Benedict asks, "if he is always moving?"

Bergoglio raises his eyebrows, and replies, "On the journey."

It is a powerful scene in an equally powerful movie.

Could it be that our bearing witness, our living our baptisms, is as much to do with these back and forth conversations, this movement, than any prescribed doctrine?

There's a Spirit on this journey,

the same Spirit that showed up for Cornelius and Peter that day in Joppa,

the same Spirit that guides Jesus and John the Baptist on the river's edge,
the same Spirit that descended like a dove on Jesus, confirming: "This is my Son, the Beloved,"
the same Spirit that claims and holds us in our baptismal-living.

My non-Lutheran spouse reports, "You Lutherans like to have cut and dry answers to what baptism is;
maybe it's not that simple."

She's right, I know that:

Our baptisms are a lived experience, often messy, often beautiful, grace in progress.

Recently we received a letter and check from Pastor Ingrid Rasmussen, over at Holy Trinity Lutheran, on
31st near Minnehaha.

Ingrid had told me this was coming, but it was the letter that moved me the most, I'll read you just a bit:

"Not long ago, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church received an unexpected estate gift.

At first we believed the gift was in error;

we had no records indicating the deceased had ever been affiliated with the congregation.

While we wanted to accept the money and put it to good use,

we felt the need to ask the executor of the estate to provide clarity on

why this individual chose to name our congregation in her trust.

The executor replied, saying,

'She lived in the neighborhood and admired the work you are doing in the community.'"

"In that spirit, we want to share this unanticipated and generous gift with the wider community.

Our church leadership ... voted to give a portion of the funds to congregations involved in the Sanctuary
Network."

Pastor Ingrid writes, "We are pleased to send you a check for \$1,350 to support your work with Sanctuary
and immigrant justice.

Like the original benefactor, we do not wish to place other restrictions on the gift.

Please use it to meet the needs of your community as they relate to Sanctuary and immigrant justice."

She concludes, "Thank you for your bold and faithful work.

We stand with you and our prayers surround you."

She lived in the neighborhood and admired the work you are doing in the community.

There is a chain reaction going on here.

Holy Trinity's neighbor noticed their work,

noticed how they bore witness to Christ in their neighborhood.

Then Holy Trinity receives that estate gift and with some back and forth notices the work,
notices how we and others are bearing witness to Christ in our neighborhood.

And the chain continues.

Our congregation and our partners and our immigrant neighbors grapple with how to live out this calling,
how to bear witness to Christ,
how to be the beloved community in this fraught and critical time.

That's what happens when the Holy Spirit gets into the water and won't let us stay the same:

More than three years ago, some of you began to bear witness: we need to consider Sanctuary, you said.

Back and forth we went, how do we bear witness in these times?

How do we live our baptisms?

How do we honor the dignity of our neighbors?

Even having known this was coming, I read the letter from Pastor Ingrid with tears in my eyes.

This is what it means to bear witness to Christ.

Of course this wouldn't be the response of every congregation—we all hear and heed this gospel
differently—but this is how Holy Trinity bore witness, and how we bear witness.

Dear friends in Christ, in these times,

I'm convinced we must see one another as God's Beloved, that takes some intentionality,
especially when we're cranky, or they are.

And—when it's safe, when it's healthy—we must stay in conversation.

As we look to this week, take a moment, think about who it is you need to see as Beloved.....

And take a moment now to make a plan to stay in conversation....

May you trust the voice of God naming you Beloved.

May you meet one another, trusting that they, too, are Beloved.

May you make a space for holy conversation, for being changed.

And may the Spirit of God go with you on the journey. Amen.