

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.7.2018



## Collapsing the Distance

By the Reverend Pen Peery

Mark 1:4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

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"well pleased..."

That strikes me as an appropriate description of what a parent is feeling after their child is baptized.

The next time we have a baptism in this room, take a peek.

You'll see what I mean.

After saying the words, sprinkling some water, and walking the baby down the aisle to introduce them to their new faith family, I always look up at the parent (or the parents) just before handing their freshly baptized child back to them, and that's what I see written all over their faces: they are well-pleased.



Having stood by the baptismal font, not as a pastor, but as a father – I remember that feeling. And remember being pleased on a hundred different levels. That this amazing gift of a child would be claimed by Christ, embraced by the congregation? That they were now a part of a Christian family that stretched around the world and back through time? That they would know what it felt like to receive love as a free gift of grace?

Well pleased.

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This morning we hear an account of Jesus' baptism. I think it is safe to say that Jesus' baptism was a little different than most of the ones we have seen. You don't get the sense that much of Jesus' family was there. I doubt Mary and Joseph were looking on. I am relatively certain Jesus didn't wear an heirloom gown with booties and a bonnet. There wasn't an Elder who presented him for the sacrament. And there was no brunch afterwards.

No, Jesus' baptism was different.

For one thing – the water was gross. No crystal pitcher and baptismal bowl. No, the Jordan River is kind of like a long mud puddle. It's brown – without much of a current – and it winds and trickles its way through the desert that separates Israel from Jordan.

Then there were the people. We talk a good game in here about baptizing sinners – but the people who went out to the Jordan River? They were the kind who might have been on the Sherriff's most-wanted-list in Jerusalem...real sleazy, legitimate sinners...the kind of folks who could point to specifics when they were asked if they wanted to repent and turn their lives around.

And there was John – strange man, that one. A street preacher who had to do his work in the wilderness because the prim and proper city-folk wouldn't tolerate his kind of religion.

When Jesus was baptized, he got in line with all of those other sinners, down by the muddy bank of the Jordan River; he had John dunk him...under the water...and when he came up, something else happened that was different: the heavens tore open and he heard a voice: "with you I am well pleased."

Growing up, I was the kind of kid who thought that the best thing my father could possibly say to me was "I'm proud of you." That's kind of predictable, first-born stuff. We first-borns tend to care a lot about approval.

And I know it's a little presumptuous for us to speculate about what Jesus must have felt like when he heard God say those words at his baptism...but, c'mon, don't you know it felt good?

So, I wonder, what was it that pleased God?

What about that moment caused the almighty to speak?



What moved the Father's to burst with pride?

If I understand the text, what pleased God was seeing his son – not just preach about sin, but get into the muddy river with the sinners...seeing his son – not just acknowledge the reality of brokenness, but step into it...seeing his son – not just speculate about what it meant to be fully human, but to immerse himself with humanity.

I think the Father was pleased because when Jesus decided to be baptized he was effectively claiming his purpose and his identity.

And parents are rightly proud when they see their children claim their purpose and identity.

Mark's gospel has this curious description of what happened when Jesus was baptized. Other gospels talk about the heavens opening up...but Mark uses a different word. He says the heavens were torn apart.

In Jesus' time, the heavens were thought to be a kind of buffer between the world and God. Conventional wisdom held that this was a good thing. The God who created the heavens and the earth was not the domesticated, cuddly deity that we often mistake God to be. Being in the presence of God was dangerous. In the time of Jesus' ministry the only place on earth where God's presence was thought to reside was in the Holy of Holies – a room within the Temple in Jerusalem that was the home of the Ark of the Covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments given directly from God to Moses at Mount Sinai.

Only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, one of the priests of the Temple would venture into the Holy of Holies to offer a sacrifice to God. Before Jesus arrived on the scene, this was a close as human beings got to God's presence. Outside of the Holy of the Holies, the heavens served to separate God from the people.

But what happens at Jesus' baptism is that the time for separation between God and the people of God begins to come to an end. That's why Mark uses such a violent word. When Jesus climbed down into the Jordan with the sinners the heavens weren't just opened...they were torn apart.

And when we keep reading the gospel, we see that throughout Jesus' life, the heavens continued to tear. Every time Jesus touched the unclean, every time he broke bread with sinners, every time he consorted with the tax collectors, every time he offered forgiveness to the undeserving – the veil between heaven and earth ripped a little wider and the separation between God and the people of God collapsed.

And at the end of Mark's gospel...after Jesus is strung up like a criminal for loving the world too much...after Jesus takes his final breath from the cross...it is complete. In chapter 15 of the gospel Mark tells us that at Jesus' death, the curtain that separates the Holy of Holies



from the people is torn in two. The curtain isn't opened. It's torn. The distance between us and God is gone.

That space that used to exist between God and the people of God? That boundary between heaven and earth? That curtain between the Holy and the unholy?

Jesus stepped into that space and abolished it...tore it into pieces. Rendered it useless. Filled it with his body, so that the world might know God's grace and presence; that the world might believe.

So here's the thing. After Jesus died. After the curtain was torn top to bottom. After Jesus was raised and after he ascended into heaven – Jesus still has a body in this world.

And that body is you – and me: the church is the body of Christ.

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We live in a moment in history that so often feels defined by difference: by the difference that exists between neighbor and neighbor; the difference between two, diametrically opposed world-views, or political persuasions, or opinions.

Those differences create distance. They are wedges that drive God's people apart from one another – sometimes even to the place where we no longer see the image of God in the face of those with whom we have our differences.

More and more I have come to believe that in these moments – in our moment – the most important role for the body of Christ...for the church...for us...is to be willing to step into the middle of the space that is created by difference...to do what Jesus did at his baptism...to bear witness to a God who will not be separated from the world that God loves.

This fall I saw it – the body of Christ stepping into that space.

It happened on Coronet Way – a street in the Lakewood neighborhood in northwest Charlotte.

With some other partner churches, our congregation built two Habitat homes for two deserving families...that is something that we do every year. But this year, the new homeowners' names were Ali and Nasva Bore (and their five children), from Somalia, and Hasaan and Zeinab Hagi (and their two girls) from Egypt.

During a time when the headlines were debating about immigration and the threat posed by a clash between civilizations, volunteers from 12 Christian churches were swinging hammers and driving nails alongside two Muslim families. At the dedication of those two homes last month, we all stood on the muddy front yard in front of that new construction and heard Jesus' words from the gospel: what is the greatest commandment? *To love the Lord your God*



*with all your heart, and mind, and strength...and to love your neighbor as yourself.*

And I think that God was pleased by that. Well pleased.

This week I heard it – a testimony to the power of Christ to bridge the space created by difference.

On the radio broadcast StoryCorps, I met two men named Eddie Vernon and Ricky Jackson. In 1975, in Cleveland, Ohio, the authorities pressured the then 12-year-old Eddie Vernon into testifying against a teenager named Ricky Jackson for a crime Ricky didn't commit.

39 years later, in 2014, Eddie broke his silence and admitted that his testimony was false.

Ricky and the two others who had been innocent teenagers in 1975 were now grown men who has spent the majority of their lives in prison.

Last year – through his lawyer – Ricky reached out to Eddie. He wanted to meet him. While he was in prison, Ricky imagined what he would do to Eddie if he lived to see that day. He was – understandably tied up in knots with anger. But by the time Ricky and Eddie met last year, that anger had melted away.

“That day when I saw you,” ‘Ricky said, “when we embraced, it felt like you got a whole lot lighter in my arms.”

“I did,” Eddie said. “I did.”

“And I know,” Ricky said, “that it must have been hard to go back into the courthouse and admit that you were wrong. So just remember: you did your part when it counted most – you hear me talking to you, man?”

“I thank God for that,” Eddie said. “I really do.”

I think God was pleased by that. Well pleased.

In you, I can sense it: the possibility of what it might mean for you to examine those places in your lives where you experience difference and distance...where your relationships – with your family, or your spouse, or your friends, or your neighbor, or the stranger – where those relationships feel cut-off and distant. Where the space between you feels wide – and it's hard to know whose job it is to take the first step.

I sense possibility in you because you have been baptized into the life and ministry of Jesus Christ –

who took the first step

who filled the space between what was broken

who reminded us that we are not defined by our difference.



And I pray that this knowledge of your baptism into Christ's life will give you courage in this new year to do the same – to step forward – to be a bridge – to collapse the distance – to bear witness to a love that overcomes difference.

And I know that when we do that – God will be well pleased.

