

Pastor Roy's Sermon from January 11, 2015

This week we have seen a rising up of unity and support for free speech in France and many other countries following the mass shooting against a newspaper in Paris and other acts of violence. Unity has been strengthened because of an attack on those who valued free speech as a right and a vital necessity for a decent society. An attack against individuals is an attack against the whole group because of the shared value.

Of course, there are different levels of unity based on different causes. Some are strong and lasting; some are temporary and based on specific interests.

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist comes calling the people to repent and be baptized. His baptism is a preparation for the real thing. His baptism is not the essence of faith, it is a beginning. It's as if John is saying, "Come on folks, bring your values into alignment with God's. Practice justice and mercy. Care about your neighbor. Someone is coming, the Messiah, who will show you *the way with God*. God will no longer be out there somewhere. God will be here with us, within us. So right now, repent and get ready to listen and learn. Get ready for the Spirit. Get ready for an intense unity, for Union with God as the Messiah will reveal.

John is saying, "You can have common goals with God. Keep working on that, but get ready because when the Messiah comes, you must let go of everything that doesn't fit. When Messiah comes, you need to jump on board." His baptism was about repentant preparation. John's baptism is the beginning.

Then comes Jesus. Mark remembers our recent reading from Isaiah, "O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Jesus presents himself for baptism. Mark and the reader know that Jesus is the one of whom John speaks when he says, One more powerful than I is coming, I am not worthy to stoop and loosen his sandals. I baptize you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is baptized and as he comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove. That of which Isaiah dreamed happens to Jesus. Jesus hears a voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." The division between heaven and earth is bridged. Here is God's Son who knows union with God. The Spirit validates this reality. Jesus' baptism is not first and foremost about repentance, it is about union with God. This is not a narrow unity. This is full union. This is not a popular uprising for the time-being, a temporary expression of passion about a beloved ideal. This is eternal. This is for keeps.

Remember that Jesus is fully human so this dance of union is a matter of his consecration to God's goals, authority, healing, and energy. For Jesus, it's not about Jesus, it's about God! He is motivated by the will of God, the love of God, the mercy of God, the justice of God. He will give all for this cause. No exceptions. That is what union is.

John's baptism is perhaps about unity and our efforts to reach God. Jesus' baptism is about union and God's power to reach us.

Jesus is union with God. In the words of Christian faith, he is the first born of the resurrection. We who follow Jesus are invited likewise to be joined with him in union with God. This is beyond repentance for sin, for brokenness and the conflict which surrounds all of us.

Perhaps this is why Paul makes such a big deal about which baptism the Ephesian disciples received. John's is just a beginning--a realizing that God is calling us to a new kind of life and journey with God. The baptism of Jesus is a baptism of not just unity with God, (that is John's) but into union with God. That is why the Spirit is present and dwells with Jesus at his baptism. Baptism in the name of Jesus is a recognition and celebration of his union with God.

When we are baptized we celebrate that the Spirit dwells within us. This is not just unity with God, it is God with us in Christ, in the Spirit. Baptism is a lifegiving, hope filling sign that God walks with us, that the Spirit is within us. Baptism is a reminder that we and all of creation have come from God and we are returning with all of creation to God. Repentance is a beginning but the end is "God with us." In baptism. In life. In death. In resurrection to eternal union with God.

Let me say it again, our faith is not just a focus on how unclean and sinfully broken we are or details like whether or not our congregation is growing. Our faith is a matter of following our Lord in his Union with God. Faith is not about perfection or whether we are good enough, but about giving ourselves over to the mercy of God, walking with God, receiving all that God has for us and within us every moment of this journey. When we pray, let us focus on God's love, goodness, and mercy. Not about how good or bad we are, or how successful we are at loving. When we serve, let us remember that God is serving through us. When we rest, let us remember that God is holding us with care and strength in mercy and love. Let us focus on our union with God which for us begins and ends with Jesus Christ. Let us release all the details which weigh us down and cause us to worry and fret. Then we are free to keep growing into our faith, into our union with God. Thanks be to God for the gift of faith which gives us hope and life. Amen.