

“The Letter and the Spirit”

Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might enter again into our baptisms and share in your spirit of righteousness and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

One of my favorite things to do with Bible study is to explore what isn't there. Scripture says a lot of things, but if you pay attention, there are just as many gaps as there are clear prescriptions. I had a woman tell me once that she joined my congregation in Alabama because of a sermon in which I suggested that the last line of First Corinthians 13 – “And now faith, hope, and love abide, and the greatest of these is love” – could be interpreted as a hint that maybe there were lost chapters on faith and hope similar to that chapter on love. She had never been given permission to think about the Bible curiously or creatively before, and she was delighted to find a church that encouraged it.

Our scripture readings today subtly point toward another gap, this one of much greater significance. Let's call it the Jesus baptizing gap. We have very clear, vivid stories about John the Baptist. We know how he interpreted the significance of baptism; we know how passionately he promoted it as a ritual of repentance. We know where he did it and what he was wearing. We even know what he was eating while he was out there in the wilderness! Perhaps most importantly, we know that Jesus thought it was important enough to go get baptized by John himself.

And then we skip to Acts, and the apostles are baptizing people all over the place. And we know water is still involved, but now there's this other element, the Holy Spirit. Sometimes she shows up beforehand, as a sign that baptism is the next appropriate step; sometimes the Holy Spirit is a gift bestowed immediately following baptism. According to Paul, if a baptism is to be a Jesus baptism, the Holy Spirit is going to show up, one way or the other. Sometimes it compelled people to speak in tongues, as in this passage about the Ephesians, but not always. Regardless of the details, the Holy Spirit is a very present presence in the baptism stories in Acts.

What we don't have is any story about Jesus baptizing anyone. We know he commanded the disciples to do so, though a lot of the language about that was obviously added in after the fact (see the triune baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19). But there are no stories of Jesus performing baptisms himself, not on the disciples, not on any other followers, not on repenting Pharisees or converting centurions. Isn't this a curious absence? How did the church come to its understanding of baptism into Christ? How did baptism become such a pivotal ritual, without any stories of Jesus doing it or teaching on it being included in the gospels? Were the baptisms Jesus performed too personal, too intimate to write about? Or were they so obvious and taken for granted that nobody thought to document them? How was it that Paul was so clear on what baptism in Jesus' name meant, in distinction to John's baptism? What source material did he have that we don't have access to? Isn't it just like the Holy Spirit to emerge out of such a mysterious silence?

Perhaps we should give thanks to the Holy Spirit at this point, for it seems that despite this dearth of information, the church has had no trouble developing a theology, indeed multiple theologies, of baptism, tying them to the minimal mentions scripture does provide and feeling secure enough in our various perspectives to argue about them. No doubt the guidance of the Holy Spirit had a lot to do with that, at least the development part, if not the arguing. What is interesting to me about this mysterious development is a dynamic that looks as though it could become a contrast but doesn't end up that way.

As I noted earlier, there are a few things that are very clear about John's baptism. The most important one is that John was, as Mark puts it, "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." When the people came to the Jordan to be baptized, it says, they confessed their sins. Paul knows this about John's baptism, which he explicitly explains to the Ephesians, saying that "John baptized with the baptism of repentance." He goes on to imply that Jesus' baptism is somehow different, primarily because it invokes the Holy Spirit. That is an interesting if unintended reflection of the story from Mark, in which Jesus' baptism was followed up by the descending of the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." But the story of Jesus' baptism also leads us back to a question, namely, if John's baptism was about repentance of sins, and Jesus was God's beloved, presumably sinless Son, why did he have John baptize him in the first place?

One could almost be convinced, if we only read this passage from Acts 19, that baptism in Jesus' name doesn't have much at all to do with repentance from sin. But if we look at the history of baptism in church tradition, we know that isn't true. Repentance of our sins and being forgiven are part of baptism in every tradition, including our own, in which those steps are two of the five in Raccoon John Smith's five-finger exercise. We've been clearer about that across denominational lines than we have been about the role of the Holy Spirit. So what are we to make of these two dynamics? How do they relate to one another? Are they in tension? Do they take us in different directions?

As I was contemplating all this, the phrase that came into my head was "the letter and the spirit of the law." When we use the phrase normally, the letter and the spirit are held in contrast to one another. It's usually that someone has found a way to stay within the letter of the law – not technically breaking the law, while exploiting a loophole or omission to subvert the primary point or goal of the law, that is, the spirit of the law. Conversely, when a badly written law needs to be challenged, someone may break the letter of the law, but use as their defense that the technically illegal thing they did was actually more in keeping with the spirit of the law than not having done it. You are familiar with the tension I am describing here. This idea is often useful, but also sometimes abused. I would argue we too often lean on this concept in lazy ways, as when Christians declare that they prefer the loving God of the New Testament over the legalistic, vengeful God of the Old Testament. This sets

up a false and damaging contrast with our Jewish siblings that locks them into the letter of the law while claiming a wanton liberty for ourselves, because we have been baptized with the Holy Spirit, the seal of God's grace and forgiveness.

Baptism is not a "get out of jail free" card. The mercy offered to us in Christ Jesus is not cheap grace. There is plenty of mystery here about how it works, but Christian baptism does still press upon us a duty to the law. The law of Christ for us may not be the same as the laws of Judaism, but we are under no less obligation to respect the letter of the law of love, as well as the spirit. Our baptism is not an invitation into a happy-go-lucky lifestyle where we just go along doing whatever and not worrying about anyone else. Our baptism is a commitment to renounce evil, to reject everything that diminishes the reign of God, to resist the ways of violence and oppression, honoring the letter and the spirit of the law of Christ's love.

Part of choosing to be baptized is committing ourselves to discerning the difference between right and wrong. Most of us, when we made that decision, were pretty sure we had a handle on that. Basic stuff, right? And yet, we underestimate the insidious power of evil if we assume we'll always see it coming. The events of this past week have laid out in stark contrast how the ways of falsehood and violence can damage the common good that is rooted in fairness, honesty and mutual respect. We know right from wrong, and yet, the sheer scale of harm done to our institutions, not to mention the people who serve within them and the structures that house them, has overwhelmed us this week.

This is a situation in which it becomes painfully clear how important it is that our baptismal commitments are to both the letter and the spirit of the law. We must be ready to renounce evil and reject sin, but we must always lean on the Holy Spirit's guiding presence as we do so. The Holy Spirit's wisdom will help us discern where seemingly "minor" offenses can lead, so we won't be taken by surprise when hatred erupts into violence in our midst. We must be willing to lean on the Holy Spirit's power that comes from our baptism, to muster up the courage to call out wickedness as it happens, rather than waiting till conventional wisdom has finally determined it was wrong.

There is much of mystery in our understanding of our baptism into Christ Jesus. But there is also much that is crystal clear. We are called to confess our sins, our personal sins and our collective sins. We are called to renounce evil and reject violence and abuses of power. We are called to the letter and the spirit of the law of love. We are called to be beloved children of God, seeking the favor of the One who created us in love, redeems us in mercy, and sustains us in hope. May we be empowered by the Holy Spirit to boldly follow Jesus, proclaiming repentance and the good news of God's grace. Hallelujah and Amen!