

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, January 12, 2020

Rev. John Tapscott

“PEOPLE WHO RESEMBLE JESUS”

Matthew 3:13-15

Here is God’s goal for people who believe in his Son – that we would come to resemble Jesus. God’s Spirit is making us like Jesus.

A few years ago I, along with a fellow clergyman, the Rev. Dale Skinner, stood in the Jordan River, near where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. Now no one knows whether that was the exact spot, but it’s where the tour buses stop. The state of Israel has built a special platform and shelter on the river bank. There are steps down into the water and change rooms further back, so visitors can enter the Jordan in their swimming gear. So Dale and I stood in our swimming trunks in waters almost waist deep. Certainly the waters of the Jordan were cooler and deeper than I had expected. And if you’re trying to imagine me in a bathing suit, stop imagining, because I had a shirt and light jacket on.

Anyway, Dale and I were standing in the Jordan for a particular reason. We had invited people from our tour group to renew their faith and to be re-baptized in the Jordan. Many did enter into the river to be re-baptized, not by immersion, but with a good handful of water from the Jordan poured on their head. One person was baptized for the first time. Now Dale and I were disobeying our worship professors who told us that baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event, and shouldn’t be repeated, even if you were baptized as an infant. But we made an exception. Infant baptism is wonderful, but to have the experience of baptism as an adult is very meaningful, I think. And for our people, including Dale and I, who re-baptized one another, it was a significant spiritual event.

If you’ve never been baptized, but would like to be, please ask me about it. We baptize people of all ages, and adults do find it very special. Anyone who professes Christian faith and is baptized as an adult is in good company, for Jesus himself was baptized as an adult.

We read today of Jesus coming to be baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan. But John resisted. He didn’t think Jesus needed to be baptized and he was right. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” After all, John was offering people a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John realized that Jesus didn’t need such a baptism. He was without sin. But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” In other words, this was what God wanted Jesus to do. “And John consented.”

Why was Jesus baptized? It was a significant step in his saving mission. Jesus was without sin throughout his life. But his desire to be baptized indicated his willingness to identify with sinners. It looked ahead to what would happen on the cross. There the sinless one became sin for us, the final offering for sin, dying in our place and rising again for our salvation. And now as we identify

with him through baptism and faith, his righteousness is transferred to us, so that we are declared righteous by God, forgiven and acceptable to God for all eternity. That's why Jesus was baptized – in order to identify with us completely. His going down under the waters of the Jordan symbolized the baptism of death he would undergo on the cross. His rising out of the waters looked ahead to his rising again from the dead on Easter morning. And on that glorious Easter day God effectively said to the whole world what only Jesus himself heard on the day of his baptism. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

In his baptism Jesus identified with us. And now in baptism, in our symbolic dying and rising again with Christ, we identify with him.

Presbyterian pastor John Buchanan tells of baptizing a two-year-old boy. After the child had been baptized, Pastor Buchanan, following the Presbyterian worship book, put his hand on the little boy's head and said, "You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever." Unexpectedly, the little boy looked up and responded, "Uh-oh." The people in the congregation laughed. But, writes Buchanan, the child's response was appropriate. Buchanan called it a "stunning theological affirmation."

Baptism ought to be an "uh-oh" kind of event. It means that that we are no longer our own. We are no longer children of this world; we are children of God. And God has set a goal for our lives. God's goal for our earthly life is that we come to resemble Jesus. Paul writes in Romans 8, "Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son." When Jesus had been baptized, just as he came out of the water, suddenly the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him." That same Holy Spirit of God has descended upon us who identify with Christ through baptism and faith. God's Spirit is making us like Jesus. Now what do people who resemble Jesus look like?

First, people who resemble Jesus are concerned for righteousness.

Now I have mentioned the righteousness God gives us as a gift as we put our faith in Jesus. Paul writes in Philippians "(I) have a righteousness of my own not that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." This righteous standing before God qualifies us to enter God's heaven as his ransomed, redeemed, forgiven children. We can't earn this righteousness. We can only receive it as a gift through faith.

But there is another meaning to righteousness. And that is a desire to do what is right. Righteousness means living in a way that obeys God and pleases him. That was the righteousness Jesus was talking about when he said to John, "it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus was always concerned to do what was right in God's sight. And people like us, who are becoming like Jesus, should be too.

You see, we are faced with two alternatives on almost every issue – God's way and the world's way. And our concern should be to live in God's way, for that is the way that brings blessedness and happiness and fulfillment. The world's way ultimately leaves people lost and empty and dissatisfied, even though it seems easier and more attractive.

Unfortunately, the church and God's people sometimes try to blend the world's way with God's way or get them mixed up. We are sometimes more concerned with doing what pleases the world or conforms to the world, than with what pleases God and conforms to his will. We sometimes think that conforming to the world makes the faith and the church more attractive to the world. What really attracts people to the Christian faith is when the church offers something quite different and better than the world offers. People get tired of the thin soup and ever-lower standards the world offers. It was true for the early church and it's true today. People are seeking something higher and better and more fulfilling for body, mind and spirit. And that's exactly what the church at its best offers – Jesus Christ and the God-life in him.

People who resemble Jesus are concerned with doing what is right in God's eyes. Yes, it can be costly to do so, but we seek to please God, as Jesus did, rather than please the fickle world. So, let me stress this - church grows and thrives not when it conforms to the world, but when it stands out from the world. God's Spirit is making us into people who resemble Jesus – people who are concerned for righteousness.

Secondly, people who resemble Jesus are compassionate servants.

In Isaiah 42, God said through the prophet, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations...a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench..."

Now originally these words referred to the nation Israel, but the prophecy was finally fulfilled in one man, God's Son. Jesus said, "I came not to be served, but to serve." Jesus himself was the suffering servant. He was full of compassion, especially for the bruised and the hurting and the weak, and those in whom the light had grown dim. Jesus was such a blessing to those whom the world had cast aside or forgotten. The Gospels say of him, "He had compassion for the crowds, for they were like sheep without a shepherd..." And what compassion, mercy and love he poured out for us all on the cross. He did not break us who have been bruised and broken by sin's power. Instead, he was bruised and broken in order to restore us and reconcile us with God. And now by his wounds we are healed.

Now we don't need to save the world; it has already been saved from the ultimate power of sin and death through the Suffering Servant's cross and resurrection. But the Spirit is making us like Jesus. That means that the Spirit is forming us as compassionate servants who serve others with kindness, which is a fruit of the Spirit. How much compassion and kindness is needed in the sometimes nasty and bruised world. There are so many opportunities for us to serve others in the name of Jesus - the broken, the forgotten, the lonely, the hungry. Now we can't do everything, but each of us can think of one person whom we can serve in the upcoming week with kindness and compassion. But don't just think of that person; do it. And don't do it with any thought of payback or reward. For you have already received your reward in Christ. Someone once said that we ought to have a sign over the door for all to see as we exit the church on Sunday morning. That sign would read, "The worship has ended; now the service begins." God's Holy Spirit is making us into compassionate servants who resemble Jesus.

Finally, people who resemble Jesus are a light in the world.

God said to Israel, "I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations." Jesus is the fulfillment of that promise. He said, "I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but have the light of life." Jesus said to his followers, "You are the light and the salt of the world." What did he mean? Well, not that we in ourselves are the light, because only he is. But he meant that we are reflectors of his light.

Do you know how important bicycle reflectors are on a dark night? Vitally important, in some cases the difference between life and death. So we who have identified with Jesus through baptism and faith reflect his light in the world. We are witnesses to Jesus and his love, his victory over sin and evil and death, his Lordship. We give witness to the everlasting Kingdom which is coming, and even now breaks among us wherever God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. We give witness to the God who said, "I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols." Jesus shines his light upon us, and his light is reflected through our words and deeds.

God's Holy Spirit is making us like Jesus. Of course, we stumble and fall and we need much mercy and forgiveness. For most of us there is a long way to go. But God's unceasing Spirit continues to shape and form us as people who resemble our Lord. And we look forward to that wonderful day, when as a great preacher put it, 'the angels themselves will see us coming up the slope of heaven and say, "Look at that man, that woman, how much they resemble Jesus."' "