

January 12th, 2025

Luke 3:15-17 “Saved to Serve”

I’m excited and happy to welcome our sisters and brothers from Chico First Baptist to this worship space. For about a year and a half now, Pastor Gail and I have been talking about how our two churches can collaborate and address some of our community’s ministry needs. Both of our congregations are doing good ministry on our own but think of what we can accomplish together! One of the things that we have going for us is how much we have in common. Our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is in full ecumenical partnership with the United Church of Christ. That means that we can swap ministers without having to jump through a lot of the hoops that other clergy have to in order to cross denominational lines. I’ve always wondered why we never became full ecumenical partners with the American Baptist Church. As many of you are discovering, we share a *lot* of common values. In fact, if you want my opinion on the matter, I’d say we have *more* in common with the ABC than the UCC just because of the way we practice baptism. Here’s how the UCC website describes baptism on their denominational website – “In the United Church of Christ, baptism is typically practiced by sprinkling or pouring water on the head of the person being baptized, with the option for immersion in some congregations.” Hey Gail, how do you all practice baptism? Wow! So do we! We dunk ‘em! Excuse me, we practice baptism by immersion. We also practice what’s called “believers’ baptism,” which means we want people to be of an age where they can confess their faith. We don’t baptize infants or small children because they don’t have a say in the matter. We don’t inherit our faith, we confess it.

I don’t know about the American Baptists, but we Disciples have a history of taking what seems to be a simple practice and complicating it to the extreme. Take baptism for example. When I served as senior pastor of the First Christian Church in Pearisburg, Virginia, we had a young man come forward one Sunday to confess his faith and express his desire to follow Jesus. I think Josh was maybe, I dunno, 12 or 13

years old at the time. The congregation was thrilled that this young man wanted to follow Jesus. Now see, I knew Josh was going to come forward that morning and the family and I already made arrangements for Josh to be baptized the following week. Well after the service, a woman approached me and said, “Aen’t we going to baptize Josh?” I said, “Yeah, we’re going to have a baptism service next Sunday.” She said, “Well why can’t we do it today?” I said, “Josh’s parents wanted to have it next week so their family from out of town could come.” And she said, “Okay, but why can’t we do it today?” I thought she was joking, so I said, “Well, it takes quite a while to fill the baptismal.” She said, “Can’t we go down to the river and do it?” I said, “I suppose, but why not wait until next week when we can do it here so everyone can participate?” And she said, “Yes, but what if something happens to him between now and next week?” I said, “What do you mean?” She said, “I’m afraid that if he dies this week he’ll go to hell!” She was not joking.

And then it hit me. “Aaahhhh I get it.” In the early days of our movement, there were some people who believed that the act of baptism itself is what “saves” a person. But most of the folks who believed that became a part of either the Church of Christ that split off in 1906, or the Independent Christian Churches in 1968. They were what many in the early days of our movement were called “Water Regenerationists.” They believed that if a person died unbaptized, they would go to hell. Which is kind of strange when you consider that we won’t even baptize someone until they’re old enough to confess their faith. So then what happens to kids between the time they are born and the time they choose to follow Jesus? You’d be surprised at the theological gymnastics that water regenerationists perform to answer that question!

Both of our scriptures from Luke and Acts are about baptism, and both were written by Luke. The one in Luke’s gospel is about Jesus’ baptism, and the other in Acts is about two apostles going to Samaria to visit some people who had, “only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus” as verse 16 states. Okay: Warning – I’m about ready to say something that’s going to sound like, “baptism isn’t really that big of a

deal” which, if we’re being honest, is going to sound like heresy to both traditions who are gathered here today! Well, you better be careful there, pastor because Mark 16:16 says, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.” True. However, the earliest manuscripts of Mark end with verse 8. That means the church that *received* the gospel of Mark was missing verses 9 - 20 which, I might add, is the same section that teaches only real disciples of Jesus, can handle snakes and drink poison without being harmed. Okay, fine. But over in John 3 Jesus told Nicodemus, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” So where do we get the idea that “born of water” means being baptized? Everyone comes from the waters of birth. That was a common way to describe the birthing process back then. Also, John is saying that being born of the Spirit is what counts most. Well there’s dozens of scriptures in Acts that suggest baptism is required – *or else!* In Acts 2:38 on the day of Pentecost, Peter told a crowd to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. But there’s no “or else.” Also, he follows it up with, “and receives the Holy Spirit.” Okay, but what about Paul? Surely Mr. Hardcore Churchman Paul has a few things to say about baptism. Yes, he does. In Romans 6:3-4 he says, “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too *may live a new life.*” Hah! There! So that we may live a new life! Okay, but live a new life *where?* In 1 Corinthians 6:11 Paul writes, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” So when people confess Christ they become a new person – their old lives become a thing of the past in favor for something new. Again, where’s the “or else?”

See, I think that over the centuries it’s the church who has inserted the “or else.” Maybe this is like Mark’s gospel that all of a sudden started showing up in places with 12 extra verses. Consider this a “preacher secret” because I haven’t passed one on to you since September 29th. I

do this from time to time – I tell folks about secrets that preachers have learned over the years, but we keep them hidden from our congregations. Here's today's preacher secret: "Preachers lean heavy into the 'or else' *even if there isn't one* because it's easier to control your flock with "or else's." Good grief pastor Jesse, you're going to get thrown out of your preacher's union if you keep sharing these secrets. Yeah, well Mick Foley got ostracized back in the 90s for unveiling the secrets of professional wrestling as did Val Valentino when he hosted, "Breaking the Magician's Code." As I always say, "I'm just showing you what the Bible says. I am shining the light of scripture to reveal that which is often kept hidden in darkness."

Our scripture from Acts 8:14-17 says, "Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might *receive the Holy Spirit* (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had *only* been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they *received the Holy Spirit*." They had *only* been baptized. According to this text, what is more important – The act of baptism, or receiving the Holy Spirit? There is no doubt in my mind that Josh, the young man at the First Christian Church in Pearisburg, received the Holy Spirit. That's what inspired him to follow Christ and what inspired him to be baptized as an outward declaration of his inward transformation. It's not a ticket to the afterlife and it's certainly not a "get out of hell free" card. There. I said it. Do I think people should be baptized? Absolutely. It's one of the three most important sacraments of our churches – baptism, communion, and the priesthood of all believers. Humans, especially those in leadership, are the ones who want to complicate things so that we can have control over the boundaries we draw between those who are "in" and those who are "out." A study from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary determined that there are close to 45,000 denominations of the Christian faith worldwide and 200 of those are here in the United States. We love to draw our lines. That's why it's good when churches like First

Baptist and First Christian find each other and erase some of those old lines rather than draw new ones as we humans often do.

Our other scripture from Luke gives us an account of Jesus' baptism. John, a charismatic yet quirky prophet, was out in the wilderness baptizing people as an act of repentance. The ritual was simple. Because we have all been tainted by sin, the act of being immersed in water was a symbol of the cleansing of sins. Most scholars theorize that John was part of a Jewish community called the Essenes who practiced baptism as an act of ritual purification. The people who traveled into the wilderness to see John began asking him if he was the messiah. He said, "No. I'm baptizing with water. There is one more powerful than I who is coming. I'm not even worthy of untying his sandals. He will baptize you with the *Holy Spirit* and fire." Following this passage, Luke tells of Jesus coming to John to be baptized. When he was baptized Jesus received the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove, and a voice came from heaven – "You are my beloved son. With you I am well pleased." After that, Luke writes, "Jesus, *full of the Holy Spirit*, returned from the Jordan and was *led by the Spirit* into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil." Spoiler alert he successfully rejected the devil's temptations. Then after that Luke wrote, "Then Jesus, *filled with the power of the Spirit*, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone." Well, not so much by his hometown synagogue, but that's another sermon for another day.

Do you see the connection here? As we are prone to do, we fail to see the work of the Holy Spirit because we're more concerned with drawing our lines than creating space for people to receive the Spirit. All of us, clergy and lay people, need to repeatedly remind ourselves of who we are following and whose mission we have been baptized into. In the end, any question of whether or not baptism is really important will be answered by whether or not we *live out* that baptism in service of Christ to the world.