

After Baptism?

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 22:34-40

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After enlightenment, the laundry.

When we have had an experience with God whether that be a dramatic, pentecostal moment with fire tongues and rushing winds or the softer, slower moments of growing up in faithful community, what comes after? When one has said to God, “here am I, send me,” what does one say to God next? When we, on a beautiful June Sunday morning, have taken the polar plunge that is baptism at the First Baptist Church of Rochester, what then? When we gather outside the baptistry as witnesses, allowing the immersion of these three to remind us of our baptismal covenant, of our desire to follow in the ways of Christ, what then?

Jack Kornfield, the Buddhist author of a book titled with a paraphrase of the first phrase of this sermon, *After the Ecstasy, the Laundry* adds to that dichotomy by pointing out that “after the honeymoon comes the marriage; after the election, comes the hard work of governing.” After baptism comes the life of faith, but what does that mean? That’s a question that we’ve been looking into over the past several weeks with several of our youngest worshipers who were ready for and/or curious about baptism. The question at hand was, if baptism is (among many other things) an intentional and outward sign of the beginning of a faith journey, then what is needed to go about that journey? The trouble for us was that Christians have answered that question in so many ways!

If we’re embarking on a journey of faith, it is clear we will need to have some understanding of what Christian worship is like and why we do the things we do, yes? So there is good reason to understand about 1700 years’ worth of spiritual practice and corporate worship *and* out of that context where is worship headed now. But of course Christian moral teaching is of high importance on the journey too, so the nuances of the tradition, reason, and experience Christians have used for centuries to answer difficult ethical questions is important even for the dailiness of our living. But so, of course, is it important for us to understand how what we have in common and what is distinctive about us over against others from other religious traditions or none or generally just people who are different from us. So a working understanding of other faiths and ideas in the world is clearly a must. You may see the trouble we faced from the outset, the life of faith can be deeply complicated. That’s why, as we were preparing to make these outward signs today we decided it would be really great if we could take on a kind of sampler platter of the kinds of thinking and experience the life of faith would beg of us, but if we could somehow distill it all to one most important quality. It wasn’t our hope, mind you, to oversimplify faith, but to focus it so that after enlightenment, after a high experience with God, after baptism we might have a beginning point for the unfolding of all the other myriad details. We wanted to know, in short, not what’s the one and only thing, not what’s the simplistic uncomplicated truth, but amid all of the important things, what’s the *most* important thing when navigating the life of faith.

I recently got to see the most important piece of navigational equipment in the early days of global travel. It wasn’t what I would have guessed it would be. By the early eighteenth century sailors had already decided that having a kind of grid system to measure the face of the earth would be helpful, thus latitude and longitude. They even knew quite well how to tell what latitude degree one stood upon, which is deeply helpful

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

for north and south travel. If you can measure the angle of the sun from where you stand, you can calculate your latitude simply enough. That enabled a great deal of land based and short range sea travel by comparing latitude to landmarks that set out longitude. At sea, where there were no landmarks though, one needed another way to calculate longitude and that problem befuddled navigators for centuries. They knew that one's position on earth could be understood in relation to the stars, thus they had begun to develop very detailed charts of the stars. The longitude problem, though, was created because the earth is spinning, so the relative position of any given point on the planet changes in relation to the stars every moment. So there in the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London, England I saw prints of the early star charts they used and the telescopes used to map the stars and the instruments used to precisely calculate their angles, and I stood in a room full of versions the most important navigational tool of them all – The ones that had levers and springs and things whirring and clicking, the one that made the charts make sense and interpreted the angles in context. That most important instrument of all being of course – Is Pat Hanley with us? – the clock. If you know what time it is you can know where you should be relative to the position of the stars and thus know where on earth you are.

In answering a question asked of him about which of the ancient laws was most important – a text that became our theme text in learning about baptism and for setting out on a life of faith – Jesus gave us a clock. Amid all of the ancient laws, regulations set in place to help humans interface with God, ways to embody their faith, amid them all Jesus said it was most important to love God. But like a rogue witness on the stand he just wouldn't leave it at that. There's more – a second commandment without which the first makes no sense – love others. He offered no other commentary in the moment. Yes, faith can be complicated, but if you're looking for the most important part – love God, love others – the clock of navigating faith. Yes, other things are of great importance too. Without a good way to look at the stars you're going to have a hard time going anywhere, and without detailed charts you'll get lost, and without a system to measure relative angles you may as well stay home. But all of those things have no meaning until interpreted by the time of day.

After baptism, what then? Well, there are a lot of answers to that question, but if you're making an earnest effort to love God and to love the people you're in this life with you'll have everything you need to find yourself in this life and to find your way through.
Amen.