



“A Portrait of Spiritual Formation”

Micah 6:6-8; Colossians 3:8-17

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Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

The words of the Covenant of Baptism are becoming quite familiar at Plymouth. In the last 24 months, we've said these words 23 times as we've welcomed children into the family of God. The Covenant will become more familiar in the months ahead. We have a number of children in the pipeline waiting for baptism. Plymouth Church is in the midst of a baby boom. We have 50 more children in DiscoveryLand than we had four years ago.

Our children are a delightful gift to Plymouth. Many of us remember when we had just a few children. Now we have more than 100 registered for DiscoveryLand, our children's Sunday School program. We joyfully welcome them all with open arms and the love of Christ.

Our children are also a daunting responsibility. The baptism of a child – or adult – is the beginning of a long journey filled with challenges and risks. Raising children in this world in this place is, often, a frightening responsibility.

Baptism is much more than a cultural or religious rite of passage. We believe that baptism is a covenantal act that connects us to our children, to their families and to God. By solemn oath we bind ourselves together in the joyful responsibility of raising our children to know and love God and to serve God and God's creation.

We baptize our children *into* something specific. In the waters of baptism each is joined to an ancient tradition, the people of God in all times and in every place. At the same time we baptize them into a living community of that ancient tradition of faith. They belong to a people and they belong to us. With bands of love we hold them close and give them God's love and grace.

This ancient/modern Christian faith has specific content. I like the exceptionally short definition of faith offered by Timothy Luke Johnson, who teaches theology at the Divinity School of Emory University:

To be a Christian in any significant sense of the term is to claim that God is fully present in the human Jesus in a manner and fullness not realized in any other creature. It is to claim the way of knowing called faith, with the willingness to imagine the world that is imagined by Scripture.

Christian faith and our life together are centered in Jesus Christ. We listen to and obey his teaching as a word from God. We cling to his life, death, and resurrection for our salvation.

Our faith is framed by the biblical narrative which describes God's way with the world, and which teaches moral boundaries and ethical norms – it is a way of life and a way of faith.

At each baptism we promise to tell that story to our children and to live ourselves into the story in order to embody it before our children.

Our children, along with all of us, experience this ancient/modern faith in this community marked by faith, joy, and love.

We also baptize children *toward* something specific. Baptism speaks to the present and looks to the future. It is the beginning of a long journey with specific goals. In the words of the covenant, “we look to the day when they will sit with us at the Lord’s Table, declare faith in Jesus Christ, confirm the heritage we pass along to them, and come to full commitment to God’s will and word.”

Baptism points toward our spiritual formation. It assumes that one day we will be mature, fully formed disciples of Christ. Or to put it another way, baptism begins the process that makes us fully grown, real humans, formed in the image of Christ.

And that presents a bit of a problem. What does a fully formed Christian look like? Twenty years from now, what do we want Dustin and all our children to be? (with emphasis on the word “be”).

The contemporary literature on spirituality is quite vague at that point. Most spirituality material focuses on the hunger for God or for a spiritual life that is so much part of our culture. Feeding that hunger seems to be the end as well as the means of a spiritual life. It is difficult to find description of what the content of such a “spiritual” person’s character might be. It seems to me the real question must be: What’s the point of spiritual formation in the Christian tradition? What exactly are we supposed to become?

I return to Professor Johnson’s definition. Being a Christian means the “willingness to imagine the world imagined by Scripture.” And I would add, and the willingness to imagine the kind of person imagined by Scripture.

So, what in the world are those persons imagined by Scripture?

I suppose all of us either remember or have heard John Lennon’s famous 1971 hit “Imagine.” Lennon imagines a better world than this one. Interestingly the song is wistful, even sad, and not terribly hopeful.

Imagine, the song says, a world with no religion, no countries, no possessions and no violence. Then, Lennon believes, we will have peace.

Unfortunately, such a vision is unrealistic without a robust moral imperative and Lennon’s song has no such imperative. We just imagine.

The biblical imagination is quite different. Take Micah 6, our Old Testament Lesson, a prophetic vision for a better world – the prophetic books of the bible are filled with similar visions.

Micah and the prophets begin with sober realism. Something is wrong in the world and needs changing. Micah’s indictment seems strangely familiar and quite modern. The powerful take from the weak and pervert justice. They buy officials and judges in order to feed their own purposes. Women and children, the most vulnerable in society, are victims at the hands of the powerful. The strong turn aside from the lame and the blind. No one gets a fair deal the way things are. And, it needs be said, the nation uses violence and war to serve its own national interests. The “common good” is long lost in the tangle of politics, greed, and selfish acquisition. (I’m not making this up! Micah wrote this in the Eighth Century B.C.!)

But, Micah adds, God is sending One who will tend the whole flock with tender mercy and loving kindness. The Coming One will provide security and justice for all the people. He

will bring peace because he brings God's shalom to earth. Then Micah adds that famous metaphor, "then they will turn their swords into plows and will not learn war anymore."

In the meantime – and a life of faith is always living in the meantime – believe in that world, God's world, and reform yourselves and the nation toward that new world. Then Micah adds his often quoted summary of God's demand for reform:

And what does the Lord require of you but to *do justice, love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.*

That is the moral imperative that drives the Christian imagination. Do justice simply means do the right thing, not the convenient thing. It means demanding that local and national leaders do the right thing for all people. It means being motivated by a passion for the common good.

Love kindness, the prophet demands. Look kindly on all people for each bears God's image, is dearly loved by God, and – Christians believe – Christ died for each person. So imitate God. Give people a break, and offer a kind word instead of retaliation. Forgive and forget. Be patient with the flaws of others. Don't just be kind, but love kindness.

Walk humbly with your God. Don't think for a minute you can live or succeed on your own. Be dependent on God and act like you are dependent. Everything we are and everything we have is a gift. Act like it. God is the Lord. We are not.

Notice that the ancient prophet imagines the world in a specific moral framework. Everything is to be ordered by that moral framework. Political issues are first of all moral issues. What is just and for the common good? Economic issues should be primarily moral issues. What is best for all God's people? What is best for the world?

We cannot, perhaps, expect our local and national leaders to have primary commitment to a moral framework for all of life. But the church can be the conscience of the community and the nation and bear witness to another way of imagining the world beyond conventional politics.

God calls us to teach our children – and remind ourselves – this biblical, moral imagining. We look to the day when our children and all of us, "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God."

But there is more to the biblical vision for the world. Our New Testament Lesson, Colossians 3:12-17, offers a vision of a new humanity. God's transformation of the world starts in transformed people.

Jesus put it simply: we must be "born from above." Faith in Jesus Christ opens our life to the life of God who comes to live in the form of the Holy Spirit. God's work in us is transformation from what we are to what we should be.

This transformation, the new creation, St. Paul calls it, is a life-long process in which faith mixed with love, hope, and joy changes us – and changes our children. Conversely, lack of faith negates the process.

Paul offers a vision of such a new person. He likely is calling to mind the ancient baptismal practice in which people being baptized took off their old clothes, walked through a pool of water and, on the other side, put on new white clothes. The old life and self is left behind, a new creation is beginning.

So, Paul says, get rid of that old, raggedy clothing that is so inappropriate in the new humanity. Strip off "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language....Do not lie to each other." All these, he suggests, are the reason the world is in the divided, violent dangerous shape it's in.

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In the new world imagined by Christian faith, all the old divisions and hatreds are cancelled out by the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. In this new world, Paul says,

...there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised (a huge dividing line in that world), barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, [and in Galatians Paul adds, male and female], but Christ is all and in all!

In the meantime, put on a new outfit appropriate for living in the new creation:

Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Now having all those new pieces of clothing, here's what you need to do to make the outfit work:

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...and be thankful. Pay attention to the word of God, sing and worship together....do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Imagine that! Imagine yourself in that new humanity. And imagine our children growing up in a new and alternative world. Imagine a new community, Plymouth Church, which embodies that transforming vision. Imagine that!

Amen

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