

**“Insight into the Nature of Christian Life and Ministry”**

**Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11**

**Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman**

**First Baptist Church, Raleigh**

**January 7, 2018**

Deacon ordination presents a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the nature of not only deacon ministry, but all ministry, indeed the whole of Christian life. But this day is also fraught with peril.

For one thing, the preacher is tempted to get on a high horse and demand far too much from deacons. Most of us have heard this kind of sermon. Some of us have preached one or two to precious little effect.

For another thing, most new deacons already feel overwhelmed by the prospect of serving in this role. In fact, many first-time deacons express doubts about whether they are worthy to serve in this capacity, and that is actually a good thing. The person who has no doubts, but rather seeks out the position, is the one who needs to be watched.

But while the preacher may want to say too much, deacons being ordained can't hear much, other than a word of affirmation and blessing, and the primary concern of everyone else is as to what time we are going to get out of here. We have our lunch reservations and plans for the day. Worship needs to be finished by noon even if Jesus himself is preaching, and it takes a long time for all these people to come forward...

This day is full of possibilities and fraught with peril, but the good news is when we ordain deacons, the service often falls on a day called Baptism of the Lord. On this day, we read texts about Jesus' baptism and baptism in general, and these texts offer tremendous yet concise insight into the nature of Christian life and ministry.

One thing we see here is that humility is a virtue. It may not be very popular in our culture, even the culture of the contemporary church, but humility lies at the heart of Jesus' life and ministry and it lies at the center of this story about his baptism.

Jesus is the one who does not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, according to the Apostle Paul, writing to the

church in Philippi, but rather empties himself into the form of a slave (Philippians 2:6-7). Now, he is willing to submit to the ritual of baptism just like everyone else, even though he has no need for forgiveness.

For this reason and others, the early church seems embarrassed about this story of John baptizing Jesus. It is always a brief account, like we have in Mark; it is often told as an aside; and Luke doesn't tell this story until he has John safely locked away in prison (Luke 3:19-22).

Part of the concern is that in the early days, there are still disciples of John who have not joined the disciples of Jesus. It is not yet clear to everyone who the Messiah figure is and thus to tell a story about John baptizing Jesus is problematic. But another part of the concern is with the Messiah being baptized at all, as if he needs forgiveness or has to do something to prove his status before God. It is beneath him. It's like the Queen changing a flat tire or the President washing dishes.

Yet Jesus is not the type to avoid getting his hands dirty. So, he willingly submits to baptism, not because he has to or because he needs forgiveness, but because he wants to set an example. It's part of a larger pattern of humility. He empties himself into human form. He willingly submits to baptism. He gives himself to others, especially the poor and outcast. Then, he lays down his life for his friends.

If he is the one we follow, everything we do is bathed in humility. And by "we" I mean – ministers, deacons, all of us. We do not avoid the difficult work. We are willing to get our hands dirty. We do not insist on our own way, but listen to the views of others and acknowledge that we are not always right.

A wise theologian began every lecture with the simple phrase - about this I may be wrong. He would then teach with conviction, but he was genuinely open to being proved wrong because he realized that none of us ever knows the whole truth about anything. That's humility, it is a central characteristic of all who follow the Messiah who lays down his life, and though it may not be very common, it is a much-needed quality.

Another thing we see in this story is that obedience is a virtue as well. This is difficult for us to hear because obedience is a term that has fallen from favor, and in a certain sense, this is probably a good thing.

I have had serious questions about a number of weddings I have done and often counseled caution to couples when I had concern, but the only wedding I refused to perform was for a young woman in another church I served where the groom insisted in one of our pre-marriage meetings that his wife would have to pledge to honor and obey him.

Rather than simply telling him no, I asked him why this was so important to him and he proceeded to tell me that the only marriages that survive, the only marriages God blesses, are the ones where the woman obeys the man no matter what. He went on to say that his father had actually abused his mother, which he probably should not have done, he said, but she still obeyed him and that is why they were still married.

When I refused to perform the wedding, the mother of the bride thanked me profusely, saying, “That girl hasn’t obeyed anything her father or mother has said since she was a child... The thought of her blindly obeying that little so-and-so makes me furious!”

Blind obedience to another human being is not a good thing, but that is not what we are talking about here. We are talking about obedience to God. In Matthew’s version of this story, John hesitates to baptize Jesus until Jesus insists, saying he must do this to fulfill all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). He is not talking about his need for forgiveness, but the need for the faithful to be immersed into God’s new way of life. If Jesus is going to lead the way, he has to do what God expects others to do. So, he is obedient to God’s desire now and always.

Such is our calling as ministers and deacons and fellow members of the body of Christ - to be obedient to God in all things. The key is that we are talking about obedience to God, not to any human being nor even the church. To trust the church’s teaching in general is a good thing, but to blindly assume that the church accurately speaks for God at all times is to be unaware of history and oblivious to current reality.

While reading Ken Follett’s *A Column of Fire*, I have been reminded of how long Christians not only disagreed with one another, Protestants and Catholics, but labelled each other as heretics and put each other to death. No matter how we view various issues of dispute, the idea that other Christians are not Christians is simply wrong and to put other believers to death, presuming to act for God, is blasphemous.

In like manner, while watching the television series *The Crown*, a depiction of Queen Elizabeth II's reign, I have been reminded that not that long ago the church viewed divorce to be an unforgivable offense. The vast majority of Christians no longer believe that is God's perspective and the very idea that a church started by a king with six wives would become so hyper-pious about marriage would be laughable if this position had not wounded so many people.

We are called to be obedient to God in all things, but only to God, and that is not always an easy matter to discern, even for the church. Perhaps we must trust in Thomas Merton's claim that the desire to please God in and of itself pleases God. As long as we seek with all our hearts to discern God's desire in the midst of any challenge and then follow that desire, we are doing the best we can.

And so, we see in this story that humility and obedience are virtues for all who follow the Christ who humbles himself and submits to God's desire in baptism, and then, we see that we need not live out our faith alone, but rather can be empowered by the Holy Spirit in all we do.

When Jesus is baptized, Mark says the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends on him like a dove. A voice from heaven proclaims, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." When Jesus is tempted to question his identity, when he is rejected, he will remember this moment of affirmation, he will remember who he is and whose he is, and this knowledge will sustain him. Baptism can offer this same gift to us. It is a kind of affirmation and blessing, as God embraces us in love, and we return this love with our confession of faith.

But Jesus receives more than a word of affirmation here. He receives the full empowerment of the Spirit. If God, Christ and the Spirit are one, it is not entirely clear how the Spirit could ever have not been present in Jesus' life, but something significant happens here. However Jesus experienced the Spirit before, this story depicts a different kind of empowerment, an internal dwelling of a life-giving force that will guide and direct Jesus in all that he says and does.

Something similar is going on in the reading from Acts. Some new believers have been baptized but for whatever reason, they have not

received the Spirit. Paul remedies this problem. He baptizes them again in the name of Jesus, lays his hands on them and they receive the Spirit.

We need to be careful not to overread this story. How and when the Spirit enters a person's life varies dramatically. I often ask baptismal candidates when the Spirit comes – before, during or after baptism. It is a trick question. If you read the book of Acts, you learn that the answer to the question is - yes! Sometimes the Spirit seems to come before baptism, sometimes during and sometimes after. There is no formula.

In fact, the Eastern Church has argued that the Spirit is always present everywhere, Psalm 139 says as much. What happens at some critical moment of faith is that we awaken to the Spirit's presence, we realize that we are not alone, and that is what is most important for Jesus, the early disciples in Ephesus and us. We cannot fulfill our calling alone, but we don't have to. The Spirit is with us, guiding us, empowering us, if we will only recognize and accept the help.

Whenever I participate in an ordination service, I try to offer a brief, specific word of affirmation to the individual, but I always include an added word of encouragement – always remember that you are not alone whenever you serve in Christ's name. It's what I pray for before offering any kind of pastoral ministry. It's what deacons need most whether they are offering care, spiritual guidance or church leadership. It's what we all need in the midst of any challenge we face - a simple reminder that we are not alone because the Spirit of God is with us, guiding us and working through us, sometimes even in spite of us.

So, for deacons and ministers, indeed all who seek to follow Christ in service, there are three words of insight found in the story of Jesus' baptism. Humility is a virtue, as is obedience to God, and in everything we say and do, we can claim the aid of the Spirit who dwells within us. Anyone who embraces this wisdom will be involved in faithful service.