

Faithful Disciples

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Baptismal explanations: You might be wondering what is going on at this part of the service. What we have here is oil from the Holy Land blessed by the Bishop. We anoint the newly baptized as a way of recognizing that they have not only been born of water, but born of the Spirit.

On your baptismal candle are the symbols “alpha” and “omega”, the two Greek words indicating God is eternal, the first and the last; a blue triangle to remind us that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and a descending dove to remind us of the gift of the Spirit we receive in our baptism.

Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28; Psalm 31:1-5, 19-24;
Romans 1:16-17; 3-22b-28; Matthew 7:21-29

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jennifer, you could not have picked a worse day to get baptized, with a text like this! But I want to tell you about another woman, Jennifer. Her name was Ethel. She was getting on in years, getting well on in years as a matter of fact, and had gradually become more and more depressed with the passing of time. She finally called her Pastor and asked if he would mind coming by for a visit.

The Pastor was delighted to respond to the call. Esther was a long time, stalwart member of the congregation. She never missed a worship service, she was active in the women’s group, she was always ready to help take care of the altar; you could rely on Esther whenever you needed something done, even given the fact of her frailty and age.

Esther welcomed her pastor warmly when he arrived, and bustled about getting coffee and cookies. And when the civilities were over Esther began to speak of her depression and her increasing lack of energy and interest. While she was talking, the pastor noticed three well cared for African Violets on the sill of the living room window. Each was a different color and next to each one was an empty pot, clearly waiting for the violet next to it to be propagated. This lady not only had green thumbs, but she was a talented horticulturist.

The Pastor listened carefully to what she had to say and finally asked her would she mind seeing her doctor. He wasn’t sure that she would, so he asked that she would give him her word that she would go see the doctor and tell the doctor exactly what she had just told him. And Esther agreed.

Then her pastor looked at her closely said something that shocked her to the core. He said, “You know, Esther, I don’t really think your depression is your problem.” “Oh?” she replied. “No,” the pastor went on “I think your problem is the fact that you’re just not a good Christian.” Esther was stunned, and a heavy silence descended on the room. It gets worse, Jennifer.

I wonder if that isn't the way people listening to the Sermon on the Mountain felt when they heard Jesus say to them these things at the conclusion of the sermon. Did you really catch the severity of his remarks? Listen to them again. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'" What on earth is the man talking about?

They are perplexing and disturbing words, aren't they? A tad disturbing to hear, Jennifer? Something for us to think that either the scriptures or Hardy has gone nuts, and we know which the easier choice there would be!

What Jesus is doing is denouncing people who are religiously active and then rub salt in the wound by calling them evil doers. Dang Bishop, that's a slap in the face for you and me, and for the whole congregation!

The message of course, is this, and it's one not to be missed: that divine judgment begins with the people of God. It doesn't end there, but it begins. And, the judge who pronounces this harsh verdict is Jesus Himself. How did he live? Listen. He was the one who ate with tax collectors and sinners, the outcasts, the undesirables, the fringe people; the one who frets over Jerusalem as a mother hen cares for her brood.

Do we fret over Washington, and our politicians, as a mother hen frets over her brood? Or will we be swept up in the shallow manipulation of the networks? Or are we the ones who find the sins in others, and condemn them for them? There are the terrible questions that lie at the heart of this gospel. Our answers may well leave us pale and trembling, especially if we've taken God's grace for granted and not lived out of it toward others. You see, we cannot separate the divine judgment from divine grace as if one comes from a loving God and the other from a loving Jesus. Judgment and grace are both dimensions of God's love and demand upon those who are His children. Do you see how it's starting to unfold, Jennifer? It's not so much about what we do in a worship service on Sunday morning, but how well we carry Christ into the world where we live and work.

And since we hear these words in our time, they serve as both a warning and a cry of hope. They are a warning for us not to presume on God's generosity or take it lightly like those who want acceptance without having to change, forgiveness without having to repent, and grace without having discipleship. And the cry of hope is the cry that us back to live as disciples, to take our faith that we have in the Sunday service and turn it into real action in our lives and in our relationships and in our work places. It's going to start getting better, Jennifer.

As I said, Esther was stunned. In the silence she sat with one leg swinging as it was folded over the other, contemplating how best to express her thoughts and feelings to her pastor. She looked sharply at him and finally asked, "What on earth do you mean?" He drew her attention to the African violets. "You see," he said, "you have a remarkable talent, a gift if you will, to grow those wonderful plants. The problem is, Esther, you are keeping your gift to yourself. Here's what I want you to do," he went on, "go get a bunch of pots and start propagating more of these beautiful plants. Then when you have an adequate supply, I want you to go to every mother in the congregation who has had a baby this year and give her one. And then I want you to go and

see that every member of the congregation who is hospitalized or has been hospitalized or is sick gets one also.” And then he left.

After he left, Esther began to think about what he had said, and she decided to give it a try. She took an African violet to a friend who had recently lost her husband. Then another to a family which just had a new baby. Soon giving violets to people at certain critical points in their life became a regular part of her life. And with each plant she gave, she told the recipient she had this wonderful gift God had given her and there wasn't much else she had to offer, but she wanted to offer this gift as a way of showing people how much God loved her and had done for her, and it was her chance to return that gift in some way, shape or form to others in her congregation or in the community at large.

The questions before us are simple: What are our God-given gifts? What are the gifts that God has given us that make us unique children of God? How can we put those to use in our daily living, in our relationships, and in our work? Do you see what's going on? It's putting faith into action that's at stake. And it goes beyond just using our gifts. For the call is, Jennifer, for us to be imitators of Christ in the world. For if we don't, the world will never know Christ. And as we struggle to do that, what we'll notice is the foundation of our living is firmed and the building of our lives is strengthened.

The question then becomes, of course, exactly how to live? Well, Jesus has already explained some of that in the Sermon on the Mount, and for the rest of the season of Pentecost we will be looking at texts that talk about putting our faith into action, and the code word, the little suitcase word that carries all that thinking inside it, is “discipleship”.

Esther continued her faithful life as a member of her congregation. She tithed, she attended worship, she continued to participate in the women's groups, and she helped care for the altar. And she began to pray, with a thankful and loving heart, for the pastor who had said such shocking things to her in her living room. And, gradually, gradually, would you believe it; Esther's ministry of violet giving began to spread – beyond the congregation, into her local area, through the town.

Some ten years later, the local newspaper came out with a banner headline which read simply this: “African Violet Queen Dies – Thousands Mourn.”

May our lives be so faithfully disciplined with the gifts God has so generously given us.

Amen.