

Rules vs Relationships

By: Penny Holste

January 12, 2014. Sometimes people think that being Christian is all about the Ten Commandments. But while they are not featured front and center in many churches, baptismal fonts are. Pastor Penny preaches on the role of baptism in our lives, and with the help of Mark Twain illustrates the difference between two ways of looking at life: through rules or through relationships.

*** Transcript ***

We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I wonder how you would feel if this display were always front and center in our churches. And for those of you in the back, it's the Ten Commandments that we're illustrating here. I think those who don't understand Christianity might think that that is who we are as Christians. And sometimes we are tempted to believe that too. People will say that Christians are people who do the right things, who do good things. It's about the Ten Commandments. But you know, these things aren't front and center here, and I don't know of any church where they are. What is front and center is our baptismal font. And that's front and center in a lot of Christian churches. I've been in one church (and probably more than that, but one that I know of) where the baptismal font is always there. It's installed there; it never moves. And that way everyone has to pass by it. On the way to communion in this church, because the railing is up here, everyone passes by the font. If there's a wedding, the bride and groom separate and pass by the font. When there's a funeral, the casket and the mourners pass by the font. And the reason, I believe, that the baptismal font is so visible in our churches, is to remind us that everything that happens in our lives is touched by our baptisms.

Now I know that sounds like an amazing claim. And you say well, really how does baptism make a difference in my daily life? Let's look at what Jesus said at his baptism. You probably remember that John the Baptist went about baptizing people with a kind of ritual washing away of their sins. But he promised that someone who would come after him would be more powerful. And when that person came, the baptism that that person would give to people would give them the Holy Spirit. Well, then one day John sees the very man that he's been predicting, kneeling before him, asking John to baptize him. And John says no. I mean, it should be the other way around. And then Jesus says no, it's proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness. And I think that's the word that trips us up: righteousness. Because we go back to this. We think of doing good things, that's what makes us righteous. But you see, that's the Greek understanding of that word. You know, that there are certain values and certain deeds that, if you do them, you are a righteous person. But that wasn't Jesus' understanding. That wasn't the Hebrew understanding. That wasn't the understanding of that word all through the Old Testament. What righteousness is in Jesus' eyes and in the Old Testament is: being faithful to a promise.

God, the Old Testament writers said, was righteous because God was faithful to the promise that God made to Abraham and Abraham's descendants: to be their God, to guide them, to forgive them, to protect them. So God was righteous. God was faithful. And the children of Israel were on and off: faithful, righteous -- because they were intermittently faithful to their part of the promise -- that in response they would trust this guy, God, who claimed them. Now, of course the Ten Commandments had something to do with their faithfulness, but it wasn't integral. What was center to their faithfulness was trusting the relationship. And then, out of joy and out of thanksgiving, they would try very hard to keep the Ten Commandments. And there's quite a difference then, when we think of these two ways of

looking at life: through the Commandments -- through rules, or through relationships.

Maybe a good illustration of this comes from a favorite story, a classic story of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Samuel Clemens or Mark Twain. If you know the story of Huck Finn, you know that he was a poor boy. I don't know whether his mother died (she wasn't really in the story as far as I can remember) but his father was a drunkard. And so poor Huck, he had a rough, tough life. But he was very free. But two older ladies, sisters -- one a widow, one never married I think -- took pity on Huck, and they took him under their wing. They took him into their home to civilize him. So they bought him new clothes. They tried to teach him to read. They brought him to church. They tried to teach him manners. But poor Huck, he just couldn't stand that confinement that they gave him. He appreciated what they were trying to do, but he ran away because he couldn't handle it. Well while he was running away and hiding out on an island, he bumped into another man who had run away, who was none other than Miss Watson's (one of these two ladies) slave, Jim.

Now as soon as he saw Jim, he started having conscience pangs. Huck started to think, I should turn him in. He's a runaway slave. Because the rules that they were teaching, even the church in those days, were that Jim was a possession of Miss Watson. And so Huck felt he was stealing not to make Jim go back or to turn him in. But Huck pushed away those feelings and those conscience pangs, and he and Jim became quite a duo. For day after day, they floated down the river (as we're speaking of rivers) toward Cairo, where Jim believed he would be free. And they had lots of adventures. But as they got close to Cairo, these conscience pangs returned to Huck and he started feeling that God was so angry with him. He used the word many times "wicked" -- that he was a wicked person for not turning Jim in, and so he said the way to do it, the way to get out of this feeling is, I've got to write and tell Miss Watson: "Here's where Jim is. Come and get him." So he sat down. He wrote the letter. But just when he was about to send it, he started thinking of his relationship with Jim. All the nights they had travelled together that. They had sung together. They had eaten together. Jim's kindness to Huck. They had taken shifts in staying awake to make sure people didn't find them. And sometimes Jim would take Huck's shift just to let Huck sleep a little longer. And Huck remembered how he told Jim, I won't turn you in, don't worry. And Jim said, you are my best friend.

So here's this poor boy. He is just torn with agony. On the one hand, he feels God is so angry with him for stealing against a lady who just tried to help him. And on the other hand, he cares for Jim. What he finally does is he says, I think I am going to burn in hell for this, but he rips up the letter and he refuses to turn Jim in. He's a good illustration of the difference between living by rules -- which can be wrong or can be misapplied -- and living by a relationship and a commitment to a promise.

And when Jesus was righteous in his baptism, what he did was the Holy Spirit came to him to share with others. So that when we are baptized we are initiated into this same kind of a relationship. And it is so freeing to know that we are not the rules of life. That's not our identity. We are not the good things we do. We're not the bad things. We're not the things we're proud of, the achievements. We're not the failures or the things that we are ashamed of. The rules are there and they can be helpful. But our identity is here. It is: sons and daughters of God. And this is where it begins. Just like with the children of Israel, we're going to break these rules, these Ten Commandments. We are going to forget. We are going to avoid being faithful to God. But God is always faithful to us and takes us back and forgives us, again and again.

So that's the first way that baptism touches our everyday lives. We have a whole different relationship with God. But as you know, we are not baptized privately. We have a baptism in the middle of a church service with a whole congregation, because we're baptized into a congregation. And that's the second

amazing blessing from baptism: we learn to treat people differently. No longer are we bound to be judgmental, to nitpicking, to criticizing, to remembering and keeping score, and feeling superior to people and putting them down. We don't have to do that, because we have been made in this community, brothers and sisters. We set aside all those worries and we concentrate on our relationships. And this is really where we learn to to treat people outside of this congregation. This is our laboratory. I mean, you think of the differences of the people within this congregation. There are people who are Republicans. There are people who are Democrats. There are people who love classical music. There are people who love hard rock. There are people who want to sing songs written by dead white men only (and I've been told that). And there are people who would just as soon hear Negro spirituals every Sunday. And we tolerate each other. We accept one another. We don't nitpick. We say: but we are one. We are brothers and sisters. So it's here that we learn how to treat people outside of these walls.

So that's the second blessing. We have a whole new way of looking at people. But there's one more blessing to baptism. You probably know that we have another baptismal font. We own a second one as a congregation, but it's not in this building. It's outside, in the columbarium. And there's another congregation around that baptismal font. They are the faithful departed. They are our loved ones who are represented there with ashes and sometimes with a memorial stone only. But they are waiting for the third blessing of baptism, which we are too because we've had already two births, haven't we? We've been born as human beings. We've been reborn as children of God. And because of the righteousness of God, because of the faithfulness of God, because of the faithfulness of Christ unto death, we are invited -- we expect, we celebrate -- a third birth, when Christ returns. And these will be here. And it will be our great joy to be utterly faithful to God and to one another for eternity.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2014, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Penny Holste, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Samuel Clemens, Mark Twain