

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia
June 10, 2018 Pentecost III

1 Samuel 8:4-11, (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15)

All the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”

So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; [and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers.] He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

[Samuel said to the people, “Come, let us go to Gilgal and there renew the kingship.” So all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the LORD in Gilgal. There they sacrificed offerings of well-being before the LORD, and there Saul and all the Israelites rejoiced greatly.]

Mark 3:20-35

The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

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It is great to be together this morning. This space is so holy and beautiful, sanctified by the prayers of so many folks for so many years. And even more important and a greater blessing by far, is you. Your presence and your faith means more than I can say. So it is good news, just to be here together, to worship and share.

In addition to giving thanks for all of you, I’ve been thinking a lot about water recently. And not just because of the weather...though can I just say, Wow! But I am thinking about water because we have a baptism today, and water is an essential part of that sacrament. Indeed, the use and sanctification of ordinary things is an essential aspect of our faith.

“Christianity is an affair of things, of bread and wine, of water, and of oil, and its beliefs are anchored in things and the actions that accompany their use.”¹

In the second century, Tertullian, sometimes called the father of Latin theology, said “that God is known in a human being who could be seen and touched, and is now extended to other tangible things, water...bread and wine” and so on.²

And specifically, where water is concerned, Tertullian said, that when “God is invoked... ‘water acquires the mysterious power of conveying sanctity.’ So much is water part of God’s way of relating to human beings, he writes, that ‘Christ was never without water.

Tertullian says, He himself was baptized with water; when invited to a marriage he inaugurates the exercise of his power with water; when talking he invites the thirsty to partake of his own everlasting water; when teaching about charity he approves among the works of love the offering of a cup of water to a neighbor; he refreshes his strength at a well-side; he walks on water; he crosses it at will; he uses water to do an act of service to his disciples. This witness to baptism continues right up to the passion. When he is handed over to the cross, water plays a part (witness Pilate’s hands); and when he is pierced, water gushes out from his side (witness the soldier’s spear).”³ So...Christ Jesus was never without water.

And let us not forget that beautiful prayer in the baptismal service, the thanksgiving over the water. It calls to mind creation with the Spirit moving over the water. It speaks of the liberation of the children of Israel through the waters of the sea. The prayer speaks of Jesus’ baptism and then moves on to say that in the water of Baptism, we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.

¹ “The Spirit of Early Christian Thought” by Robert Louis Wilken, copyright 2003, page 40.

² ibid page 40

³ ibid page 40 - 41

This is what has happened for us and what will happen for Ann Campbell in just a few moments. She will set out into the Christian life, grow as a disciple of Jesus...and all because of sanctified water...our prayers and the power and grace of God in the Spirit.

This is a powerful thing...this water...this sacrament...this being marked as Christ's own forever. And it is a good thing, because the life of faith...as precious and as joyous as it is...is also arduous. We embark upon a new life in the face of death. And we become children of light, combating the forces of evil.⁴ There are many challenges.

Now a part of meeting these challenges involves wisdom and discernment. Doing the right thing is not always obvious. That is why, right after a person is baptized, we pray: Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you....and...the gift of joy and wonder. So there it is again. The joy but also the challenge.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus says, that whoever does the will of God is his brother, and sister, and mother. We all want to be Jesus' brothers, sisters, and mother. But, what is the will of God? It is complicated.

Just look at the Old Testament reading for today from Samuel. The people want a king because ever body else around them has one. The Bible has two opinions about this. There is the tradition that celebrates Israelite kings, and David especially. The messiah, as you know, was to have descended from David.

But there was also an alternate point of view, and we heard that today. Kings are a bad idea. They will tax you and abuse you. Also, the Lord God is your true king...so this desire of yours to have another king smacks of idolatry. As with so many things in the Bible, we get differing perspectives.

⁴ see the Spirit of Early Christian Thought, page 42.

And this is good because it is real and it is accurate. And in our life of faith, we have similar challenges. Just for instance, we all believe that children in our schools should be safe from violence. I think we would all say, it is God's will that our children be unharmed. Okay. So what is next?

When we get into specifics, there is no consensus, no clear way forward. Well intentioned people disagree. I am not saying that everyone in the debate is well intentioned. Of course not. But at the very same time, there are in fact, well intentioned people, who have different opinions. What are we to do?

At the very least, this is an issue that we, as people of faith, should keep raising...we've got to find a solution to this. And maybe all sides of the debate are going to have to compromise some. As Christians we need inquiring and discerning hearts, the courage to will and to persevere. And until we can, together, reach a solution, as Christians I think we can agree, we will not accept the routine death of our children as the status quo...we will not become numb. We will keep seeking a solution and demanding that our leaders address this.

And it all starts with water. Water that Christ never was without. Water, that when sanctified acquires mysterious power. Water in which we died to Christ and are raised to the new life of faith. Water...to which it is our joy, and privilege to bring Ann Campbell this morning. It is the beginning for her, of a great adventure. We welcome her into the household of faith. We will do our best for her and for God. And she will her best for us, by the same token. And this is the good news for this morning, and every morning. Amen.