

“Ambassadors for Christ”
A Baptism of the Lord Sunday sermon by

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Matthew 3:13-27

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

At the start of his earthly ministry—before Jesus had performed miracles, preached to thousands, and withstood testing by Satan—he was baptized. Before he healed the sick, stood up to Pharisees, and welcomed the outsider, he heard God declare him “my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” As it was for Jesus, it is also true for us: Our baptism reminds us that God’s love isn’t dependent on our achievements or failures, righteousness or sin. God loves us, no matter what.

This is the gift of grace—the gift of God’s unqualified love for us. And because love is sometimes hard to believe when it’s mere words, or feelings, or an idea—because love is hard to trust until it shows up in flesh and blood—God put that love into human form in Jesus Christ, so that we might hear and see and feel and know God’s love. So Christ came, and showed us God’s love in a thousand ways:

- Jesus humbled himself, so that we might learn humility.
- Jesus taught in synagogues, so that we too might cherish Scripture.
- Jesus reached out to the outcast, so that when we feel rejected, we know we still belong.
- Jesus healed the sick, so that we might know God desires our wholeness.
- Jesus wept over the dead, so that we might feel God’s deep compassion.
- Jesus led his disciples, so that we might learn how to walk in his Way.

And if all that weren’t enough, instead of fighting enemies with swords and clubs, Jesus embodied God’s way of peace and reconciliation—not by merely turning the other cheek but by giving his very life for us, in this way showing the world just how much stronger God’s love is than all the violence and hatred and corruption we can manufacture. This is the witness of the cross and resurrection: that love is stronger than hate, and life is stronger than death, and humility is stronger than pride, and peace is stronger than violence, and God’s grace is stronger—oh, so much stronger—than all the sin the world can make.

There are so many people who still don’t know this truth. But words alone, and feelings alone, and ideas alone—they’re hard to trust. The love of God—it still must be embodied to be real. We know that Jesus is with us in Spirit. But sometimes we wish he were still here in flesh and blood too.

So who will manifest this love to show to the world? It is up to us now. It is through us and our example that God still embodies that great love. Imperfect as we are, it is we, Christ's followers, who are sent into the world to show God's love.

This is the message St. Paul delivers in 2 Corinthians 5:14-19:

The love of Christ urges us on, because [he] has died for all . . . so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. . . .

Now if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.

In renewing our own baptismal vows, we claim again the love of God—love that embraces us no matter what. And we claim again our calling to be Christ's ambassadors—Jesus' presence embodied in this world.

What does it mean to be an ambassador of Christ? The Apostle Paul says that, above all, it means embodying a ministry of reconciliation—a *ministry of reconciliation*. Earl Palmer, pastor emeritus at University Church in Seattle, reminds us that the word reconciliation, *katalasso*, literally means *catalyst*. In other words, we are called to follow in Jesus' footsteps as *catalysts* to bring people together with God and one another. Palmer goes on to say:

We are entrusted with the assurance of reconciliation. . . . Jesus tells his disciples to stand in place with cheek exposed to the angry face of hostility, to love those who are considered as enemies, to pray for God's forgiveness of one's trespasses, and to ask for strength to forgive those who trespass against them. . . . Jesus does not advise avoidance. . . . He encourages us to talk through the crisis or offense that is causing harm and to find a better way that would be good for each other.ⁱ

What a different model than the ways of this world.

Sometimes—too often—we forget how great a responsibility we've taken on in claiming Christ's name. How are we representing Christ to the world? What are we doing for the reputation of Christ? If you were the only Christian someone met, what would your life, your words, your actions tell someone about Jesus? Are we embodying his humility and courage? Are we embracing Scripture as our guide and wrestling deeply with its meaning? Are we showing compassion to the broken and welcoming the stranger? Honestly, if a newcomer walked into our church on any given Sunday, would kindness, compassion, humility, gentleness, and the other gifts of the Spirit be obvious in us? Would people feel *different* as a result of knowing they'd entered a place where God is present? Would people long to be part of our community, aware of how alive and well Christ's life is in us?

We are, St. Paul tells us, ambassadors of Christ. It is up to us to embody the love of God. For the world's sake. For the sake of the reconciling love of God, made real to us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayer of Dedication

Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.

- *Teresa of Avila* (1515–1582)

ⁱ Earl F. Palmer, "A Better Thought," *Benedictory column, The Presbyterian Outlook*, Jan. 6, 2015.