

WITH WATER & FIRE

How Can a Woman Increase Her Influence?

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

A Provocative Challenge

In this morning's lesson from Matthew's gospel, we encounter a provocative challenge that has much to say to us on this day when we remember BOTH the birth of the Christian Church AND the ministry of those biological and spiritual mothers who play such a vital role in continuing the Church's life and mission. The ministry of John the Baptist is itself a vivid testimony to the power of a mother's influence. If you've read Luke chapter 1, then you that John's mother, Elizabeth – whose very name means "God is my sustenance" – was a woman of profound humility, great integrity, and persevering faithfulness. It is very likely the quality of her faith that we see extending its influence through the amazing ministry and message of her son, John.

If you were listening as we read the passage a moment ago then you know that the message of John the Baptist is a fairly simple one. It consists of three basic ideas: FIRST, that the kingdom of heaven is near. SECONDLY, that to enter into that kingdom requires a willingness to repent of our sinful allegiance to other kingdoms. And THIRDLY, that truly living in that kingdom involves a process of baptism with water and fire. These three ideas are not only at the center of John the Baptist's teaching. They are also at the core of Christ's message and that of the Early Church.

If you already understand these concepts, I hope you'll forgive me for belaboring them. But to paraphrase George Orwell, there are moments in history when conditions are such that a "re-statement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent [people]." I believe we may well be at such a moment when it comes to the future of the Christian Church in America. For that reason I'd like to unpack for us this morning the essence of John the Baptist's message and then reflect with you about how Christian mothers (and others of us too) can be a creative part of addressing the needs of our time.

The Message of John

When John the Baptist says, "**The kingdom of heaven is near,**" he is fundamentally contradicting a view of life that existed in various forms in his time but which finally developed into a widespread worldview in Europe and America during the early 19th century. There it became known as "Deism." Deism is the view that God is like some Divine Watchmaker who made the parts of the universe at Creation, wound the watch up, set it on a table, and then left the room, leaving it to function largely on its own.

But this, says John, is not the case. God is not some distant deity or celestial Caesar in far off Rome; God is a king who is near at hand. He is intimately interested and

actively involved in human life. He is working out his purposes in the day-to-day details of everyone's existence. Like any serious king, God is not content to be honored only on this one day or in this one corner or in this one limited way. God aims to have his wise and benevolent reign felt in all the spheres of life – from the way we deal with people, to the way we spend money, to the way we treat the environment, to how we conduct our politics and pursue the cause of justice, and everything else. God seeks to invade ALL the spheres of our existence with his life-blessing rule. He is IN the room and his hand is on his creation.

The kingdom of heaven is near, says John, but it will not be FULLY HERE, until we “**repent.**” This is the second important idea John the Baptist advances. He takes it for granted that one of the primary reasons human beings do not see or experience the blessings of God's reign in our lives is because we are still caught up in other kingdoms and bowing to other kings. We're following the rules of the kingdom of celebrity or the kingdom of consumption or the kingdom of competition or the kingdom of something else. Our king may be our ego or the opinion of other people or the appetites of our body or something else. What might it be for you or me?

The key idea is that if we are to enter the better kingdom God aims to give us, something is required of us. We have to confess our sins and repent. We've got to admit to God and ourselves that serving those other kings and kingdoms has been wrong. Even if serving them felt good to us, even if it yielded some kind of happiness or benefit, we have to acknowledge that serving anything or anyone other than God is sin. It separates us from God and slows the progress of his good purposes in us and through us. John calls us to confess our sin and then purposely turn away from these other rulers and purposely turn toward God. This is what the word “repentance” literally means. It is a humble turning away from sin and toward the rule of God.

And then the third and final piece of John's message: Be baptized. The scriptures say: **“Confessing their sins, they were baptized by [John] in the Jordan River.”** John goes on to say, **“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”**

It's important to understand that the baptism that is being described here isn't merely some kind of religious ritual, though the act of *water baptism* WAS a sign of what IS being described. John isn't talking either only about the coming of the Holy Spirit with tongues of flame at Pentecost, though the *fire baptism* the Early Church experienced WAS a sign of what IS being described. What the gospel is talking about is the process of allowing ourselves to be immersed in the power of God that can do for us what we can't do for ourselves.

We can never be good enough by our own efforts to earn our own salvation before a perfectly Holy God. But the moment we truly admit that reality and submit ourselves to

God, the grace he poured out through the blood of Christ washes away the stain of sin and justifies us before God for all eternity. We can never perfect our character by our own will (have you tried this?), but if we'll keep coming together, waiting humbly, prayerfully, and obediently upon God as the Early Church did, God will pour out his Holy Spirit and refine our character like fire purifies silver. (see Malachi 3:3)

This then is the gospel: The Kingdom of heaven is near. Confess your sinful allegiance to other kingdoms and repent. Let yourself be baptized by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ for your salvation and by the power of the Holy Spirit for your sanctification. The process is not effortless. It is not painless. It is neither quick, popular, nor endlessly happy. But it leads to life eternal and abundant and at the end is perfect joy. These are the basics of the gospel message.

A Culture of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Sometimes, even people who have spent a lot of time around religious buildings and doing religious rituals and reading religious books miss this. Matthew's gospel says that the Pharisees and Sadducees -- two of the most religious groups you could ever find -- missed the basics of the gospel. The proclamation of God's kingdom and kingship, the call to real confession and repentance, the images of the God whose grace leads his people through the waters to salvation and who purifies his people through fire -- this vision was all over Israel's history, declared again and again through the prophets. But somehow this vision of God or the way of discipleship hadn't sunk in. They were proud of their religious heritage ("**We have Abraham as our father**") but they treated God as if he wasn't really very close. They had reduced the faith to doing some good rituals and deeds they figured would prove themselves worthy of salvation. They were superficially pious but inwardly still unclean and unrefined. (see Matthew 23:27)

Do you know what is even more disturbing? It is how this "missing it" pattern continues within religious circles, and especially among our young. This is why, on this Pentecost Mother's Day, I'm bringing all of this up. Permit me to share first with you the BAD news and then close with the very GOOD news about all of this. A few weeks ago, our Middle School Pastor, Andy Jack, introduced many of us who have junior high kids to the results of some very sobering research. A Notre Dame sociologist by the name of Christian Smith has released the results of a landmark nationwide study of the religious attitudes of American teens. On the encouraging side, his research showed that far from being atheistic, 75% of American youth believe in God. On the disturbing side, however, the study made clear that two-thirds of these kids had a religious outlook that Dr. Smith termed "*moralistic therapeutic deism*." Let me break this down.

The youth were essentially deists. They saw God as somewhere out there, but not really "near," in the biblical sense. They didn't feel that God was truly involved in their life or even *needed* to be actively involved in their life, *unless* they were in trouble. The notion that God had a kingdom that was radically different from the dominant values

and allegiances of their society, or that they were being called out of the world's kingdoms to enter into this different kingdom, wasn't on the radar screen.

Secondly, the faith of a huge percentage of youth was in what you might call a therapeutic God. They felt that God's main objective and life's primary purpose was to make them fulfilled and happy. The idea that there might be some really major distortions of their character that required facing, confessing, or repenting of... or that God might have a good purpose for their life that could actually require significant sacrifice, pain, or periods of unhappiness was not in their field of view.

And finally, the religious outlook of most of America's youth was basically moralistic. In other words, they believe that God is going to accept them because they do good things. Happily, this generation cares a lot about doing good things. But the concept of a Being of towering holiness whose grace would be required for salvation was largely absent. So was the concept of radical love. When pressed to define further what God sought of them ethically, the majority of adolescents answered that God wants people to be nice and fair to one another. That's good. That's a start. But it is a far cry from the idea of living toward the kind of love described in 1 Corinthians 13. The vision that God wanted to refine their character so they'd be able and willing to forgive enemies, pray for those who persecute them, steward resources so as to have more to give to the poor -- except as a very unusual practice or resume-builder -- this vision was simply not in the imagination of two-thirds of even religiously-oriented youth.

In other words, the picture that the Notre Dame study revealed was that America was successfully raising DECENT people, but ones with considerably more in common with the faith of the Pharisees and Sadducees than with the view of God or the practice of discipleship historically held by orthodox Christianity.¹

Genuine Discipleship Is Always Possible

Are you about ready for the GOOD news? I don't blame you. So here it is: Christian Smith discovered to his complete surprise that these kids did not learn this belief from any of the places many of us worry they might be getting it from. They didn't develop this skewed faith system from MTV, Oprah, or any other television program. They did not pick this up from their secular schoolteachers or even primarily from their peers. They learned this Moralistic Therapeutic Deism from their mom and dad, their grandparents, and the other significant authority figures in their family.

And this is GOOD news, you ask? That was my first thought when I heard that. All I could think of were all the ways in which I might be communicating to my kids the wrong picture of God. And then, it hit me: If that is true, I can change that. Amy and I can change that. We can do that by getting clearer on what it is WE really believe and by being more intentional about modeling, mentoring, and mentioning it. It is not too late for any of us, no matter what the age of our children, no matter whether we have

children or not. Every mother or other of us here can exert an influence on the generations below us that helps them move toward knowing the God who truly is and the life he really has for us.

Unfortunately, we've run out of time today, so I'm going to issue an invitation to you. If you care about this stuff, meet me in the Garden Chapel of Christ Church this coming Wednesday night at 7:30 p.m. We're going to brainstorm the HOW of this together. And then, on a future Sunday, I'm going to gather up all of the best ideas that emerge and share them with everyone who will listen. I pray that many do, because the kingdom of heaven and King of all Creation is near. He has brought us together to be a community where we can confess our sins and repent. And God has not stopped baptizing the willing with his grace or pouring out upon them the glory of his refining fire. This is the good news and the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ "Christian Smith on the National Study of Youth and Religion" from the website Resources for American Christianity, <http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/>