

Coming Alive

Romans 12:1-8; Luke 3:15-22

The Second Sunday after Epiphany, (Jan. 19) 2025

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Only those should be baptized who reform, take on a new life, lay aside sins, are buried with Christ, and rise with him from baptism in newness of life.

-Felix Manz, letter to the Zurich town council, December 1524

The hope of a secured and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists, who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brother/sisterhood.

-Martin Luther King, Jr.

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs is more people who have come alive.

-Howard Thurman

Five hundred years ago on this Tuesday, January 21, Conrad Grebel and George Blaurock gathered in Felix Manz's house in Zurich, Switzerland and began what theologian James McClendon called the baptist movement. These three young men were followers of reformer Ulrich Zwingli yet disagreed with Zwingli over infant baptism. Grebel, Blaurock, and Manz had concluded, from studying the New Testament, that believer's baptism was a sign of becoming a disciple of Jesus. Zwingli and others debated baptism with these three young reformers in front of the Zurich town council. In January 1525 the town council ruled that Zwingli was right and only infant baptism was correct. Furthermore, that believer's baptism was

not only against the Christian faith, it was also against civil law since infant baptism was the method of recording births and the tax rolls.

These three young men, who came to be known as the Swiss Brethren, could not have disagreed more. Manz wrote to the town council, *“Only those should be baptized who reform, take on a new life, lay aside sins, are buried with Christ, and rise with him from baptism in newness of life.”* In other words, baptism is about entering the new life in Christ as disciples. It is freely done as we respond (we’re responsible) to the calling of the Living Christ, through the Holy Spirit. It is not about keeping up the city’s tax rolls or getting the state’s citizenship papers or even a state church; it is a sign or sacrament of a believer responding to the call of Christ. Oh, and one other thing, they said, it is not the business of the town council, the civil state to decide issues of faith! The state should keep their noses out of telling people what to believe, how to pray, how to read the Bible, and who and when to baptize!

Hear me this morning and hear those Swiss Brethren from 500 years ago! Christ calls us to follow him in discipleship and we are to live according to Jesus Christ, not according to the State!

Talk about setting off a revolution! Wow! So, these three young men gathered in Felix Manz’s house, and that evening George Blaurock asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him. Grebel took a dipper of water and poured it over Blaurock’s head (it took several more years for them to learn about immersion). In turn, Blaurock baptized Manz and several others in the room. This so-called “re-baptizing” or ana-baptist movement, a term coined by their opponents, spread throughout Switzerland, what is modern day Czech Republic, southern Germany, and because they were persecuted, hunted down, burned at the stake, and drowned

in rivers, many fled to Holland, where an Anabaptist named Menno Simons wrote theology and preached. Hence, many of them became known as Menno-nites. Some years later some English Puritans fled England to Holland seeking refuge from persecution asking many of the same questions as the Anabaptists, and were influenced by Mennonites, many of them returned home to England and eventually to the American colonies and were called baptists.

When Felix Manz wrote the Zurich town council, and when the Swiss Brethren baptized each other 500 years ago, they used the phrase “buried with Christ in baptism, raised to walk in newness of life.” It is a phrase used by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6, describing baptism as leaving behind the old life and entering the new life in Christ. It is a phrase I will use in baptizing Alex, and I have used for 44 years of ministry. Every minister and every church I know uses it in one form or another. *The Message* translates it this way:

“That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus.” (Romans 6:3-4, The Message).

For Paul, baptism is like moving from an old world to a new world, leaving an old country with all its deathly, dehumanizing customs and traditions and rules and moving into a new life-giving country where we can breathe and become fully human in the way God has intended all along. Paul calls it living the resurrected life, like that of Jesus.

Paul spends eleven chapters talking about all this, and then at the beginning of chapter 12, he says, “therefore.” Therefore ... Paul says we have lived an old life in an old world that dehumanizes and diminishes us and is destroying all

creation, baptism is the marker where we give up that old life and enter a new one of becoming fully human. Therefore – so what? So, what does that all mean?

Paul puts it this way, “Therefore brothers and sisters, ... do not be conformed to this old world you’re living in but be transformed. Learn to think differently, live differently, like Christ.

In a sermon on Romans 12, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of being “transformed nonconformists.” He said, “We need to recapture the gospel glow of the early Christians, who were nonconformists in the truest sense of the word and refused to shape their witness according to the mundane patterns of the world. ... The hope of a secured and livable world lies with disciplined nonconformists, who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brother/sisterhood” (Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*).

A few years later Dr. King spoke of being maladjusted. We are to be maladjusted to injustice, racism, hatred, and violence. We adjust our lives to the Way of Newness in Christ, so we are maladjusted to the ways of Death and Despair.

One of the things you’ve heard me talk about over the years is how the Powers and Principalities, the Systems of Death-Despair-Domination seek to control and force conformity of the people who seek to live as transformed nonconformists, as maladjusted to the ways of Death. Using a variety of methods – misinformation, threats, intimidation, busyness, and just plain overwork so we’re too tired and too busy to stay faithful to the newness of life. As a result, we are ground down in despair. We give up and give in, we back up and back down.

Therefore! So, what do we do?! The heroes and saints of our faith have taught me that daily small tasks and small efforts are ways to remain human, to walk in newness of life, in this dehumanizing world.

Isolated and alone, each effort seems trivial and meek to be effective against the Darkness, but I want you to remember. First, each small effort at being human, each small action of newness of life, is a sacrament. A sacrament is when God acts through our acts of fidelity to Christ, no matter how small or mundane or humble. Every time we baptize or share the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion, every time we sing a hymn, every time we root ourselves in prayer, every time we join with others in Bible study, every time we stop and listen to a child, every time we feed someone, every time plant a garden, every time we participate in healing, every time we offer a home to an immigrant, a refugee, a pilgrim! Every time we act with love, mercy, and compassion toward someone else! Every time! Every action! God is at work in and through those actions in ways we do not understand or even see.

And each time and every time, God is at work bringing grace and life and goodness into this old world of Death and Dehumanization. And every time, God is at work empowering us to be human, to walk in newness of life.

Secondly, remember that each and every sacrament, means that even when we do not know it, we are acting in solidarity with others.

To use a musical analogy, each humble action is like we're singing a solo, maybe even singing a single note. But the truth is, we're not alone. What we do not know is that God is directing the greatest choir of all time, across time, and we're singing with the heavenly host and other voices combining into a great chorus of

joy and justice in the face of Despair that wants silence and conformity. What we don't know is like the old spiritual says, "We're never alone, no never alone."

Non-conformist Roman Catholic activist Gil Bailie visited Howard Thurman, mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr., in the early 1970s. Bailie asked Thurman, "What am I going to do with my life? What does the world need? What should I do?" Howard Thurman's response was "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs is people who come alive."

To walk in newness of life is to come alive, and it takes all of us together to learn what that means. Coming alive is done in relationships of connection and collaboration, where we tend to one another in our brokenness. What the world needs is a people coming alive, no longer conforming to this deathly world, but walking in newness of the resurrection – people coming alive to being human in a Dehumanizing world.

This is why those Anabaptists believed in a shared or common life walking in this new way. A new way free of the religious conformity of the state. Rooted together in the Living God, they knew they had to do it together or else they would not make it.

That is why the Black church was able to bring about the greatest movement and revival for justice and newness of life this country has ever seen in what we call the Civil Rights Movement. They did it together and they did it because they were rooted in the Living God who does not allow the Powers of Death and Domination to have the last word. God in Christ Jesus has the last word, and therefore we do not give up or give in, back up or back down.

December 2, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus, a simple, humble action through which God worked. That night people gathered at Ralph Abernathy's First Baptist Church of Montgomery to prepare themselves for what lay ahead. The first hymn they sang, was "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," which we will sing shortly.

A new, 26-year-old preacher in town was thrust into the limelight of leadership. Martin Luther King, Jr., who had come to Dexter Ave. Baptist Church to finish his dissertation, and to settle into a quiet life of scholarship while serving as pastor of a sophisticated and quiet congregation.

But soon the death threats started coming. Anonymous notes in the mail and phone calls throughout the day and night, sometimes as many as forty a day, all threatening to kill Martin King and his family.

At midnight of January 27, 1956, almost two months after the Montgomery Bus Boycott had begun – during what we call the season of Epiphany – Martin Luther King had what he called his "kitchen epiphany." And he never got over it.

Around midnight, the parsonage phone rang. King answered it and heard a low voice say: "N---er, we're tired of your mess. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow up your house and blow your brains out."

Shaken, King tried to go back to sleep. His wife and ten-week-old baby girl, Yolanda, were asleep nearby. But King couldn't rest.

Martin King got up and went to the kitchen where he made himself some coffee. There in the dark kitchen the fears pressed in on King, overwhelming him.

Almost paralyzed with despair, he sat down at the kitchen table and prayed: He later wrote:

I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me, I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.

The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory. "I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone."

At that moment, I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: "Stand up for justice, stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world." . . . I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone." Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared. I was ready to face anything.

January 21, 1525, three young Anabaptists baptized each other, "buried with Christ in baptism, raised to walk in newness of life." January 27, 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr. heard the voice of God re-calling him to walk in newness of life.

And on January 19, 2025, Austin Heights Baptist Church is re-called to walk in that same newness of life.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.