

Tabled

A Communion Meditation

Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

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I was last at this pulpit in November. I shared then a small bit about my baptism at age 10, specifically that I was so short that the Deacons had to come up with a method to make me taller in the water so that Pastor Denny Spear would have enough above water to actually baptize me. So, with imagination and creativity they created a path of wooden Coca Cola crates to give me four additional inches above water. My task, as the baptism candidate, was to be sure I stayed on the path! What a metaphor for baptism!

But, there is more to the story, and here is the rest of it. In preparation for the baptismal service, one of the Deacons was asked to come in early to fill the baptistery. He was very thoughtful and was of a mind to be sure that the water wasn't too cold, so he started with hot water, planning to come back later to begin mixing cold water to create a comfortable temperature. His plan would have worked had he not gotten distracted. When he returned to the filling tub, it was full and steaming! It was too late to drain and refill, so another Deacon was dispatched to find enough ice to reduce the temperature.

I had a 'fire and ice' baptism in May of 1961!

And isn't this another metaphor to consider? It certainly is for me. Not many months after I walked the narrow path of Coca Cola crates in water too warm accompanied by bobbing ice cubes, Denny Spear resigned his pastorate, taking a courageous stand for justice. His fire for the justice edge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ conflicted with the icy attitudes that prevailed in the wider culture and were left unexamined by the standards of Jesus. The Deacons created a policy, despite the pastor's strong objections, that persons of color would be denied seating in services of worship. Denny and his wife, Varian, had five small children and lived in the church-owned parsonage, and his resignation was immediate. It was a dramatic moment, not only for the Spear family, but for the First Baptist Church of Aberdeen, and for me. I wonder if I would be the same person I have become without exposure to Denny Spear and his faith, his sacrifice, and his courage.

I cannot read the stories of Jesus' baptism without remembering my own.

Today is the First Sunday After the Epiphany. Thus, we are presented with the theme of light and the enlightenment that “seeing clearly” brings. Today is also the celebration of the Baptism of Jesus and the descent of the Spirit upon him at the beginning of his earthly ministry. “Spirit” and “light,” then, lift our eyes and thoughts toward faith that forms conscience, motivates mutual care, and creates awareness of transcendence.

North Carolina author and light-hearted but seriously minded Clyde Edgerton wrote a Christian Century article a few years ago about his struggle with Church, and particularly, Baptists when all they seemed to do was judge and fight. He finally made his peace and found his place and claimed his tradition, saying this: “I've decided that for me God is the mysterious source of life. This means I am obliged to respect all kinds of things I might not respect if I didn't hold on to that particular something bigger. It means I can define my worship as service to stuff that is alive – to plants, people, animals. So the kindness of old folks at church stayed with me, and this notion of something bigger didn't leave.” (Christian Century, October 17, 2012)

Clyde leads us to the Communion Table. The linkage of baptism to the proclamation of the Word and the Supper of the Lord is, on days like today, seamless. The Communion Table calls us back to our beginnings and to our mission. It calls us to center on Jesus, laying aside our opinions, preferences, and judgments. At the Table all that matters is that Jesus transcends us and calls us to rise up higher, honoring his embodiment of God's character and the Spirit of peace and wholeness that flows through him to us. “This is my body, broken for you...This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of sins.”

Reconciliation happens here. Brokenness is healed. Fracture is repaired. Divisions yield to unity. But let me be absolutely clear: unity, not uniformity, but unity in who we follow. It would be *unworldly* for everyone in a Baptist Church to agree. But, we are called to follow, follow one Lord – together.

Dorothy Sayers once noted that the first demand the church should make of a carpenter is not that she should go to worship on Sunday, nor that he should not get drunk on his day off, but rather that the carpenter should make good tables. Let me be bold and say this: our culture needs us to be a well-tabled congregation. A well-built table has been placed in our midst. Jesus, the carpenter, the builder, says: “Come to the table.” We're all invited. No exceptions.

We have had our divisions recently. We certainly have been reacquainted with the estrangement that comes with disagreement. Clyde Edgerton's discontent with church was that it was too much like the rest of the world – contentious, frequently unyielding, and lacking in the very forgiveness it preaches. In a fire and ice world, the congregations with the most compelling message will be those that are well-tabled. Well-tabled means that we know *that* we are community, how to work at being a stronger community, and that we are a community with a mission higher than the issues that divide. It means that we are authentic in our humanness and genuine in our faith.

For 25 years I was part of the First Responder community as a fire chaplain. There were about 130 personnel in our department, 30 or so were paid, 100 were volunteers. The paid corps was unionized. The chief officers were all volunteers. On occasion differences became dominant and, shall we say, *distracting from organizational harmony*.

The Executive Director – who was both a paid administrator and a volunteer firefighter – went to a conference and discovered the secret to the success of the Boise State Football team. The Broncos! A small school that became a national power through hard work and innovation. They play on a field painted the same color blue as their uniforms - “Smurf” Blue, I’ve heard it referred to.

The presentation our Director attended had to do with a concept the coach introduced - “Be Here Now.” This concept changed the entire culture of the Boise State team and its prospects. Players and coaches and student staff were held to this standard of being fully present whenever the team assembled, whether for practice or meetings. Cell phones had to be turned off; no “screens” of any kind were allowed. “Presence” was the watchword.

Theologically, a kind of ritual of communion was created. When folks gather together, folks are in communion. The focus is the common purpose and mission.

Our fire department adopted the same kind of standard – reducing distractions, eliminating presumptions, modifying individual expectations, emphasizing the common mission. Be Here Now. Figuratively, a table was placed in the midst and all were welcomed, and all participated in raising the organization to a higher level.

This table – our table – is more than figurative. It is real, sign and symbol, reaching deep into history as ritual, honoring the Communion of Saints, and anticipating a future of grace. Our table is bathed in light and is full of Spirit. Baptism and the preached Word are anchored here. The ways of Jesus are lived here. We are called to Be Here – Now. Our presence invites transcendence, the 'something bigger,' to use

Clyde Edgerton's words. Even when we are not in this space, with this symbol before our eyes, we are aware that we are together, we are in communion, listening for the Word of the Lord, together.

Clyde said in his article that there is still a lot he likes about church. He says: “I go to a Baptist church these days...in part because I love to hear the old hymns, and I feel a kind of safety [left over from my youth]. I like the sermons because they often connect scripture with love for neighbor – the biggest “something bigger” I can imagine these days.”

Clyde Edgerton, claiming his seat at the table.

To that I can only say - “Amen.”