

Matthew 3:11-4:1

“Response”

Way back on Mother’s day we talked about how when humanity was created we were like newborn babies who want their Momma’s. Humanity was created good, and right and in a relationship of intimacy, dependence and trust with God just like a newborn baby¹ We were righteous in the face of God. Then came the Fall and Adam and Eve committed the original sin. The image of God we were created in was distorted, and because of our prideful overreach we denied our God given responsibilities and exalted our own values, desires and opinions over the commandments of God.² The result is all of creation being brought down with us. Our right relationship with God has been twisted, distorted and frayed. Humanity continues to choose to go our own way. **We** have turned away from God. (pause) Praise the Lord; **God** has not turned away from us! Amen? **Amen!** Because of the Fall and Original Sin the image of God we were created in is so distorted we cannot help but choose our own selfishness rather than choosing God. Instead of being a reflection of God in the world we are like the image we see in a fun house mirror. Even so, God continues to look for us.³ We have become like a lost child at a massive amusement park like Carrowinds, Six Flags or Disney Land. God is looking for us. God is working to restore the relationship we broke and to put the pieces back together. This is not our idea or doing. We broke our relationship with God and creation. God is working to put creation back together through a relationship with us because God loves us.

God’s first step in reaching out to us is by putting out the call. By a show of hands have y’all ever been in a department store when they come over the loud speaker and ask, “Would Billy’s parents please come to customer service? Would Billy’s parents please come to customer service? Thank you.” (pause) When I was younger that could sometimes be heard in a grocery store or Walmart if a child was separated from their parents. That is a little like God’s prevenient grace calling us away from our selfishness and back towards God. God puts out the call, and we have to choose how we will respond. Will we choose to go our own way? (pause) Will we choose to be loyal to our own opinions, convictions, and preferences? (pause) Will we decide it is more important to live our lives

our way instead of **God’s** way? **Frank Sinatra** had a song where he celebrated singing,

“I’ve lived a life that’s full
I’ve traveled each and every
highway
But more, much more than this
I did it my way”
Frank Sinatra – “My Way”

Do any of y’all know that song? (pause) That’s great for Mr.

Sinatra to be able to look back over his life and to say he did it his way, but ultimately which is better? Is it better to have lived a life our way, on our terms knowing full well we cannot earn salvation. We can never earn God’s favor, and no matter how many pleasures we take for ourselves in this life they will never compare with the sweetness of abundant life in Christ. Church, is it really better to do life our way? (pause) So how will we respond? Will we choose to go through life our way, or will we respond to God’s call and go through life God’s way?

John the Baptist responded to God’s call on his life by dressing differently; going out into the wilderness near the Jordan River and preaching a message of repentance. (pause) Church, what is repentance? (pause)

Repentance is a turn around, an about face. In Luke’s version of this morning’s story John tells

¹ Gayle Carlton Felton. By Water and the Spirit: Making Connections for Identity and Ministry, (Discipleship Resources: Nashville 1989) 9.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 10.

the multitudes, “If you have two coats share with someone who has none” (Luke 3:11). John tells the tax collectors to collect no more than they are required to collect (Luke 3:13). And to the soldiers John says, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:14). These are the instructions they received from John, but how did they respond? Did the poor receive that coat? Did the tax collectors only collect what they were instructed to gather? Did the soldiers stop abusing their power? (pause) We don’t know. Scripture does not tell us what about their response, but the story is not about them. The story is about Jesus.

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you and you come to me? But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness,’ Then he consented” (Matt 3:13-16).

In order to faithfully respond to God’s plan Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. Sisters and brothers look at this wording carefully. Jesus does not say baptism is necessary for salvation. Jesus says baptism is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Baptism is not essential for salvation. “Baptism is a **first response** in a lifelong process of salvation.”⁴ Baptism is about dying to sin, resurrection in Christ, and a new life growing in God’s grace.⁵ John Wesley taught infant baptism is a wonderful and powerful part of a person’s salvation story. Those who are baptized as infants are born again, but as if placed in a trust until the child can respond to God’s grace for themselves in faith and repentance.⁶ God always acts first – even before we are able to act ourselves as babies. However, without a personal commitment to follow and obey Christ baptism is rendered ineffective. A choice must be made. A response must be given. Without a personal commitment to Christ our baptism becomes a dead car battery when we need to leave for work. Without an evangelical response to God’s salvific gift of grace salvation is rendered useless.⁷

Brothers and sisters God is calling out to everyone. God is calling out to all of us. Are we listening? Are we paying attention? If we are paying attention will we have heard God’s call? How will we respond? (pause) In the Methodist Church we believe in one baptism because when we are baptized we are initiated and sealed into God’s holy family. In that moment we all become in-laws or outlaws in God’s family. Baptism is tied to the grace of **justification** with Christ paying the price for all of our sins. If we have been justified by God’s grace we have been moved to be baptized and to publicly declare our faith. **Baptism** is not the end of the journey. God continues to call out to us through sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace helps us to become more like Christ and to turn away from the habits and behaviors which have stolen our joy for so long. But here’s the thing. God is reaching out to us all the time. How will we respond? Will we choose to shackle ourselves with the chains of sin and death, or will we respond to God’s call to strive to live according to the upward call of Christ that we may have life and have it more abundantly. Praise the Lord, we have been given this choice to make. Sisters and brothers, what do you think we should do with our choice?

In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁶ Kenneth J. Collins. John Wesley: A Theological Journey, (Abingdon: Nashville 2003) 139.

⁷ Gayle Carlton Felton. By Water and the Spirit: Making Connections for Identity and Ministry, (Discipleship Resources: Nashville 1989) 2