

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

January 7, 2024

Torn Apart

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I've shared with you before the story of when my daughter got locked in the guest bathroom back in Northwood, ND. But I think it illustrates something rather powerful about parenting, so I'm going to repeat it again, albeit briefly: My daughter was old enough to toddle about the house but not really talking yet. Christina was out of the house, so it was just Vee and me. Somehow or another Vee ended up in the guest bathroom and managed to lock it. For whatever reason this bathroom door did not have a normal bathroom lock on it, which meant that I couldn't unlock it from the outside. Well, my daughter was crying, I was getting more and more alarmed, until eventually I took a hammer to the doorknob and was able to get the door open that way. Only to discover that my daughter had opened one of the drawers to the cabinet and I could only open the door about an inch. Via some careful maneuvering through that inch gap I was slowly able to close the drawer and eventually get to my distraught daughter. That near panic I felt trying to get to my daughter while crying her head off is what I believe God often feels towards humanity. A sort of desperation to get to us in order to save us from ourselves.

I don't wonder if there wasn't some of that desperation at work in God when Christ was baptized. The Matthew and Luke versions of this scene come across as somewhat idyllic, with profound theological conversations occurring. But not so with Mark! Throughout all of Mark's gospel there is a intense sense of urgency. The word often translated "then" in Mark is more accurately translated "immediately." The pace of Mark's gospel is very rapid, very urgent. It's no wonder then that we have language like the heavens being "torn apart" by God.

God tears apart the heavens in order to claim Jesus as beloved Son. God is desperate to make that claim on him. Just as I believe God is desperate to make that same claim on us in the waters of our baptism. God is desperate to

be with us and to claim us as children of God. And God will let nothing stand between us and divine love and grace.

In our scene today the heavens are torn apart, irrevocably. That barrier is now broken by the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. We find the same message being reiterated again at the end of Mark's gospel: "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom."¹ When Christ dies the curtain in the temple that separated the holiest of holies from everyone else is irrevocably torn. Sure, it was likely replaced, but that particular curtain would never be the same.

God is desperate to be in relationship with us. God is desperate to love us and forgive us. God wants to be with us can i not just for the mountain top moments, but also for the valleys of the shadow of death. The witness of scripture shows us how desperately God loves us and wants to be with us.

But what are these barriers? Sin, certainly. Death and the devil as well. But I think perhaps the greatest barriers that get erected between us and God are the barriers we put there ourselves. We internalize messages that we aren't good enough for God or that we're failures. And we are great at ignoring God's constant presence with us and love for us.

Or perhaps the barriers we're dealing with are barriers that other humans have put between us and God. The witness of the gospels show us Jesus regularly in conflict around barriers that people put up. And unfortunately, it's the religious that tend to be the most prone to this sinful behavior.

It's almost as if we want to put a fence around God and restrict access to God's love and grace. We do this through our religious systems and structures. We do this by expecting conformity when people join our communities of faith. We do this by creating all sorts of requirements for participating in religious life that we call traditions.

These efforts are doomed to fail though. As I was taught in seminary every time we try to put a fence around God we will discover God tearing through those fences in order to be with those we would try to keep out. God's grace is always wider than we want it to be and God's love is always deeper than we expect.

¹ Mark 15:37-38 (NRSVUE)

Take a moment now and think back on your own baptism. Odds are you don't remember it as most of us were likely baptized as infants. But I suspect we can imagine our baptisms based upon the baptisms we've witnessed. So picture in your mind's eye your parent or sponsor or grandparent or whoever it was holding you over the water while the pastor splashes it on your head. And now look up, look up to the heavens. Look up and see the tear there. The tear made so long ago and never repaired. The tear made so that God could get, first to Jesus, but then to you! All so that God could claim you as a blessed and beloved child.

God is constantly trying to get through to you. God is trying to breakdown the barriers that you have erected and others have erected between you and God. God is desperate to be with you and to love you and to forgive you and to guide you. God loves you. And God won't let anything get in the way of that love. Not your own inner turmoil. Not the religious doctrines and traditions cooked up over centuries. Not sin, death, or the devil. Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

And just as desperate is God is to be with you, God is desperate to be with your neighbor too. God doesn't want us to be in the business of erecting barriers. The example of Jesus is that we are called to be barrier Breakers instead. Followers of the way of Christ are called to be radically inclusive and graciously welcoming. We are called to be just as desperate to love one another as God is to love us. Amen.