

“The Baptized Community,” Matthew 3:13-17; 1/13/08; Albany UMC

According to a survey that just came out last week, 7 out of 10 people in this country said that they believe in God but more than half of those people do not believe in the church. And the number of people who don't go to church increases as time goes on.

We may not be able to pinpoint one main reason for this trend. But it has a lot to do with the culture we live in. Our culture says: “Money talks.” People think that money buys happiness.

Did you hear the story of the world's richest man, 50-year-old Mukesh Ambani of India? This man is building a house for his family in Mumbai. It is only 60 stories high. Out of those, the first six floors are for parking. The family now has 168 'imported' cars and 600 servants and staff. But he wants to have more; that's why he is building this new house.

When money is the only thing that talks, you cannot think of God, let alone listening to God. When money is the only thing that talks, thoughts for others can't have a room in people's hearts. When money is the only thing that talks, you can't hear the crying voices of the weak and poor in the world.

But that does not mean that God is not calling His people in the midst of this greedy, materialistic, world.

I don't know where it came from. I found this list of messages in a collection of illustrations. They say that some time ago these messages signed by God have appeared on billboards and buses in this country. I don't know when and where. Some of them go like this:

- Let's Meet at My House Sunday Before the Game.—God
- C'mon Over and Bring the Kids.—God
- We Need to Talk.—God
- Keep Using My Name in Vain and I'll Make Rush Hour Longer.—God.
- Loved the Wedding, Invite Me to the Marriage.—God
- I Love You ... I Love You ... I Love You.—God
- Will The Road You're on Get You to My Place?—God
- Follow Me.—God
- My Way Is the Highway.—God (from sermon.com, illustrations)

Some of these sound like a joke. But like them or not, God calls our names each and every day. God calls your name. God calls my name. God calls names of your sons and daughters. God calls names of your grandchildren. God calls names of your parents. God calls names of our neighbors.

No matter how good or not so good, God wants us to know that He cares about us. Our culture teaches us being independent; being self-sufficient; being self-supportive. If you can take care of yourself, they say, you are a grown-up, you are doing fine, and you even made a success. You shouldn't be dependent on anyone.

But the fact is we cannot stand on our own. No matter how well off we are we still need God. We need to rely on someone who is bigger than us. Our lives are too fragile. We are just vulnerable human beings.

The Bible says those who say there is no God are not only wrong; they are fools. But those who call God's name are wise. It does not matter how many years you went to school. You are wise and smart when you call God's name.

God calls our names because He cares. God calls us because He loves us. God calls our names because He wants us to be happy. God calls us because He wants us to be satisfied in our lives.

Things are needed; things are necessary; things sometimes make us happy. But that kind of happiness does not last. The real happiness only comes from God.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus is being baptized. Each Gospel portrays a different picture of Jesus baptism. But only Matthew says that Jesus' baptism was to fulfill God's righteousness.

Jesus did not need to be baptized. In Jewish custom, baptism was to have your sins cleansed. But Jesus, the sinless son of man, wanted to be baptized because that was what he believed people needed. Jesus wanted to be in line with John the Baptist who was spreading the message of repentance. By being baptized, Jesus wanted to be in people's shoes. He wanted to wear the same clothes as people. He wanted to wear the same hats as people. He wanted to cry with those who cried. He wanted to laugh with those who laughed. He wanted to eat with those who ate.

He just wanted to bring down the kingdom of God to the earth. He wanted to let people know that God really cares about them in their day to day lives.

But there is a special message all Gospel writers wanted to tell their listeners through Jesus' baptism: the message was religion is not just dos and don'ts; it is an experience; it is something you feel in your hearts; it is a confirmation that you get from God; it is hearing the voice of God that speaks to you on a personal level.

In Jesus' time, the church was way out of touch with the ordinary people's lives. What the Pharisees and Scribes taught were all dos and don'ts. Religion was about rules. The more they went to church, the more burdens they felt. They never felt free.

When I went to Germany to see Martin Luther's church last year, that was exactly what was going on in the Middle Ages. Back in those days, of course, all Schools were run by the church. So it didn't matter whether you went to church or school, all they taught was "do this and do that, otherwise you will go to hell." Can you believe this? That was the environment Luther and his contemporaries were growing up. So Luther said he had never been in peace. Back then, people did not have their own copies of the Bible to read. Even many pastors did not know how to read the Bible because the Bible was not translated into their own language yet. So they did not find the comfort we do simply by reading the Bible. People were always afraid. They were always scared of death. To them, God was someone who would punish them for their wrongdoings.

No wonder Luther was not only welcomed but praised by all the people when he preached about the grace of God. He said we are saved by God's grace, not by what we do. Faith is about change in our hearts. It is not "Do this and that"; it is about accepting God's saving grace; it is about forgiveness of sins; it is about being born again; it is about your personal relationship with God. It does not matter who we are. God calls each and every one of us to become his children.

With God's grace and love, we can become the happiest people in the world. It is about change in our hearts; once our hearts change, we can have a better relationship with ourselves and others. That was what the Gospel is about, Luther said.

When Jesus comes up from the water, today's text says, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit was descending upon him like a dove. So by describing this mysterious scene, Matthew is trying to say:

Hey, you people, you need to see the heavens break open. You need to feel the Spirit of God come down upon you. You need to hear the still voice of God that says to you in your hearts, "Son you are my beloved; Daughter, you are my beloved. I am well pleased with you."

How do you have all these experiences? Just like Jesus did, come humbly and allow yourself to get right with God; give yourself into God's loving grace and the Spirit of God will come into you. The barriers between you and God will break down.

Life is like sailing in an ocean. Sometimes, our lives go easier as we have the winds on our back but sometimes they have funny turns and twists. But remember this: God has sealed us as His baptized children. He takes care of his own. No matter how hard it is, we will get there because God is with us on our journey.

But one more thing: God not only calls us individually. God also calls us as a community that is bonded together in our baptism. God wants us to prove ourselves that we really stand for one another.

We are called to go on our journey together. So we care for one another. We support one another. We laugh and cry together.

I don't know about you. But to me, I feel like, my church family is more important than my blood family. I don't get to see my family and relatives that often. But I see you every week. You are more than my family. I hope everyone feels the same for one another.

With God's help, I want our church to be a family to one another. Not only that. I want us to be a church that continues to open itself with love and welcoming and serving spirit to those who are outside.

God calls us to His love; our happiness comes from accepting and responding to God's such a call. Amen.