

Coming Clean/Getting Clean

**A sermon given by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, January 9, 2011**

Prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God, we do thank you for the precious gift of this day and the precious gift of every day of our lives. And as your word breaks into our lives and fills us with your holy presence, we pray that you will strengthen us for the journey ahead together and with our families and friends that we would be found as good witnesses to the joy of your kingdom. In Christ, our Lord, Amen.

Sermon:

Yesterday morning I received word from one of my closest friends that his oldest son, Michael, had died. My friend is an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church and he and I started serving the church around the same time. He has two sons that are the same age as my two sons. Michael was born two months after our oldest son, Andrew. What does one say to a parent who has lost a child? What words of comfort can be offered? Here I was on the telephone at home, listening to my friend tell me through his tears and his heart ache that his son was dead, and there was nothing I could do but weep with him.

My experience yesterday morning is not unlike the experiences that many of you have had in learning of the death of a loved one. My friend lives too far away for me to be with him so all we have is the telephone and the internet – and I thank God for at least that connection. I remember years ago at home with my mother one night - my father was working – and the phone rang. And I answered the phone, it was up in the kitchen, and we were in the family room and it was Western Union who needed to speak to my mother. And I remember calling Mom to the phone and went back

down to the family room. I remember sitting there for the longest time and hearing nothing but silence up in the kitchen and wondering what was going on. And so I finally decided I needed to go up to where Mom was and there I found my mother weeping at the kitchen table because the message she had received from Western Union was a cold voice saying that her father had died in London.

I remember that night. I remember that the only thing I could do was to cry with her and hold her. Thank God I was able to be with her and hold her. She felt so alone and so far away from the family she loved back in England. It is how many of us feel who are separated from our loved ones and learn of the death of one our family members or closest friends. Yesterday morning as I held the telephone in my hand, all I could do was sit in disbelief and cry with my friend. It was as if I had lost one of my own family members, because I remember when Michael was born.

What do you say; what can you do; how should you respond to those who are walking through the valley of the shadow of death? What words can bring hope and comfort? What actions communicate care and presence? All I wanted to do yesterday morning was to hold my friend like the night that I held my mother, but he was hundreds of miles away. So all I could do was listen and weep.

For many the baptism of Jesus has no special meaning other than it provided the foundation upon which the sacrament of baptism rests. For me, however, it points to a very important theological principle – God cares for us so much that God becomes one with us in an effort to demonstrate solidarity with the human race and redemption of our human lives. Over the ages the Church has tried to understand and explain how God was present in Jesus reconciling the world to him. The question that has been asked over and over again is “What part of Jesus is human and what part is divine?” This is known in theological circles as the dilemma of the two natures of Jesus Christ, human and divine. No matter how hard we

search the scriptures or debate the question we have never been able to answer this question. The Nicene Creed, the most concise statement of faith that the church has, retains this mystery by stating that Jesus Christ is "true God from true God" and "became truly human." To this day the church retains the mystery of how God and humanity are present in Jesus.

It is no wonder that as Jesus presents himself to John for baptism that John responds "I need to be baptized by you." Nonetheless, Jesus was baptized by John in the muddy, dirty Jordan River "to fulfill all righteousness." In being baptized Jesus completely identifies himself with sinful humanity. He is one of us and has become one with us so that his holy presence might transform our lives and our living.

When you have been living a lie; engaging in immoral acts; holding on to terrible and destructive thoughts; building yourself up at another's expense; put simply, when you are living life that is less than human there is a freedom that comes when you see yourself as God sees you and you come clean. The truth may hurt and there may be dire consequences to pay but coming clean brings a freedom that one will never find in the darkness of sin. Joy is discovered when one realizes that Jesus, truly human, understands and does not lord it over us but walks with us especially in life's darkest moments. With his baptism Jesus finds himself standing on Jordan's banks, with all the others who sought to come clean and ready themselves to get clean with the messiah. Jesus and all the sinners touched by John the Baptist standing on the bank dripping wet and waiting for God to come and make them whole. The baptism of Jesus is yet another reminder at this time of year that not only has God become flesh in baby Jesus, but God is present in Jesus knowing our every struggle, knowing our every temptation and offering to us the freedom of walking in God's life.

Yesterday morning, as I sat in the living room listening to my friend, I did offer my tears, and I offered my silence, and I offered my prayers. I stood with him and his family just as Jesus stands with us. As Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus so we weep with our family and our friends when death comes. The only thing we can offer is our presence which serves to remind us all that we are not alone in our grief and in our struggles. No matter what life has thrown your way, no matter what mistakes or failures you've had along life's way, know this and this for sure, and it is because of this day in the life of the church that I am assured that God stands with us; God stands beside us; and God offers us life in Jesus' name, life for eternity. And let us always give thanks and praise to our savior.

Amen.