

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

***Grounded in the Water of a Beloved Touch –  
Re-Rooting Mustard Seeds***

*Ezekiel 17.22-24; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22*

Russ Dean, January 10, 2010, Deacon Ordination



Since the birth of Christian orthodoxy in the 4<sup>th</sup> century of the Common Era, when the Church granted to one opinion the right to be called “right,” the purpose of Jesus’ baptism has been an issue of debate. Why would Jesus, of all people, have been baptized? If he was who Orthodoxy said he was... why baptism – a symbol of repentance, cleansing, restoration of relationship? Tomes have been written, voices raised in debate... but not unlike Mark, who had no need to tell a narrative of Jesus’ birth, Luke has little to add to this debate. *Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized...* It’s matter-of-fact for this gospel writer. No theological conundrum to solve: Jesus... Son of God... baptism? Jesus... perfect, sinless, personification of trinity... baptism? None of those answerless questions. For Luke, baptism is a beginning. Pure and simple. A grounding. A re-rooting into God.

Ironically that re-rooting comes in water, not in soil... but very soon Jesus places his feet on the dry ground of an itinerant ministry, and the water of ritual, and the soil of practice come together in the touch of God to inaugurate a life of unique worth. We hear that touch in Luke’s story: *You are... the Beloved; with you I am well pleased* – but the authentication of Jesus’ ministry was not a baptism accompanied by a sign of divine approval. That sign came only after Jesus changed the world, one life at a time, as he walked along the dusty roads all the way to Jerusalem. Lives changed, one touch at a time, are all the authentication any ordination needs.

On this Baptism of the Lord Sunday, there is no water – except the bowls you encountered when you entered – but we have come to give, by means of a ritual, a grounding

touch, a re-rooting to the work of God that has already begun in nine lives that is not unlike a baptism. That voice, *You are my beloved... with you, I am well pleased*, has been heard in this place, as you have walked the dusty roads of life that run through Park Road Baptist Church, and it will be spoken today, in the touch of the community of faith who has heard that voice, and who wants to bless you as you begin serving as ordained deacons, today.

Lay all the doctrine aside, for when it comes right down to it, ordination, just like Christian baptism, is a mark of beginning. That's all. A ritual. Some churches use the word sacrament: an outward sign of an inward grace. But rituals are important, life-giving, necessary. Since the dawning of human self-consciousness, our species has created rituals to mark the ways and places that the divine and the human, the sacred and the secular, the spectacular and the mundane come together. Rituals mark the intersection of God's presence in our lives – simply because they call attention to it. In her book, *The Case for God*, Karen Armstrong makes the case that rituals are essential. Even in a highly sophisticated world, maybe more so in our world, the place of ritual cannot be overstated. More important than doctrine... More important than believing... are the rituals by which we seek to give a nod to the mystery we call God. No words can adequately express our experiences in life that lead us to faith – so why all the fuss over doctrinal debate?

We gather in this room weekly. It is a ritual that expresses faith. Enough said. In this room we read scripture, hearing ancient stories and sacred symbolism. It is a ritual. Enough said. In this room we pass bread and cup: "*Do this in remembrance of me.*" It is a ritual. Enough said. And once a year, in this room, a few of us kneel before the rest of us, who file by to offer a touch of silent affirmation. A whispered prayer of thanksgiving. A blessing. And Grounded in the

Water of those Beloved Touches – the Mustard Seeds of service are Re-Rooted. Our action here is a symbol. A ritual. No intellectual justification is needed. Like the water of Jesus' baptism, it's just a beginning. A new beginning – and where the service of these Deacons will end, only God knows. (That's "The Rest of the Story," as Paul Harvey used to say... that hasn't yet been told.)

And so it is with beginnings. We all have them. They come in varied ways. One commentary reminds me that less and less of the organized church has participated in baptism, proper. No longer can clergy simply remind people in the pews of their baptisms, and challenge them to live in the commitment of those warm waters. What we can do, need to do, is to call you to reflection on your own "baptisms," in whatever form they have come. There are baptisms of water, and baptisms of the laying on of hands. And there are baptisms of voices and experiences, baptisms of quiet ah-hahs and loud thunderclaps, baptisms in the church and in the home and in the office and in the car... There are baptisms of initiation, of clarification, of challenge and affirmation. The life of faith is a life lived, giving attention to all of those new births. Every little beginning, no matter how small. For the testimony of scripture and the witness of the faithful for thousands of years is that in the tiniest mustard seed... in just a sprig of cedar, there lies dormant a grand tree, waiting to be raised to provide shade in its branches, to give nest for the birds of the heavens, to produce boughs and to bear fruit.

Today's ritual symbolizes a new beginning for nine of us who are being ordained as Deacons and seven of us who are being installed to new terms of service. But maybe there will be other new beginnings for us as well. What relationship needs renewal in your life? What attitude needs to go? What neighbor needs a good word? What co-worked your sacred touch?

As you entered the sanctuary and came upon the bowl of water, you may have thought you had ventured into the wrong Park Road church – but you are here, safe, among the Baptists. But Baptists believe in baptism. It is a beautiful symbol. I like the word sacrament – a life-giving symbol. If you've never been baptized – maybe you should consider this, as a public expression of your commitments. But in the very least, as you exit the sanctuary and pass again that bowl of ordinary water, we invite you to be reminded of your baptism – and your baptisms. With a touch, or a handful, remind yourself of your own baptisms: by water... by wind... by fire! And go into this world Grounded in the Water of a Beloved Touch, re-rooted into God.

May it be so!