

***“Who Doesn’t?”***  
***Mark 1:9-13; Romans 8:31ff***  
***Sermon, 9/23/18***

In the early 1970s, I was serving a congregation in Monroe, NY, when the District Superintendent called and asked if I would coordinate an effort to help other UMCs in that area, all of which were small struggling congregations, to work closely together for more effective ministry. I said I would give it a try and soon found myself serving the Monroe congregation full time and working with two other pastors, only one of whom was full time and ordained. Practically, that meant five congregations would be served by two and a half pastors. It also meant that I would preach at Monroe every Sunday and share the pulpit in the two churches that were not assigned a specific person with the other full time pastor.

One of the smaller congregations had an average of twenty people on Sundays. Needless to say every member knew every other member, all of whom had lived in the same little town for years. Included in this mix were two older women who, to this then young minister, seemed as if they had been around since Adam and Eve. When it came to knowing the details of the others’ lives, they were head and shoulders above the rest. In my more charitable moments, I allowed that their longevity had given them that awareness. In my less charitable moments, I saw them as nosy potential trouble makers.

One particular Sunday I was ready to baptize a grandchild of one of the active members. As the family came down the aisle with their baby, holding him with obvious pride and joy, I was jolted, as was everyone else, by what I heard. Without any effort to do so quietly, one of the older women said to the other: ***If he is anything like his father, he is going to need more than baptism.***

There was no way to pretend I had not heard the comment. Nor was there anyone else who could do so. Instinctively I knew that the rest of the service would be colored by that remark - forever marring an important moment in the life of that family. Without much time for processing my words, I took the baby into my arms and walked into the middle of that tiny church. Amid the gasps and whispers, as people wondered what this crazy man was doing, I walked over to the two women and said: ***Who doesn’t?*** Possibly for the first time in years neither of them had anything to say. Therein began an impromptu sermon - perhaps one of my best - and certainly one that everyone in that room likely remembered for a long time.

***Who doesn't?*** Who doesn't need something more than a sprinkling of water and a few prayers to live as God intends for us to live? Who doesn't need, for that matter, more than a weekly gathering for an hour or so to live as we are meant to live? All of us need more than baptism. Inevitably life presents temptations, challenges, and obstacles when we need more than a symbolic marking as followers of the way of Jesus. We know that life requires an active wrestling with forces that are diametrically opposed to what was promised for us, or by us, at moments such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings and such. Rituals of faith are not a guarantee that we will follow the way of Jesus. Sometimes it takes a struggle of the mind and heart with the world.

Dave had spent a good deal of his working life in high powered positions. He was caring and loving, had many friends, good financial resources, beautiful home, nice cars, all the niceties money could buy. He retired early, but disappointed. He had been troubled by the ethical practices of the corporation that had purchased his company. He wrestled with the fact that his income, in some measure, now came from the sale of products that he knew could, and were, killing people. ***How can I live with myself and God if I put my self interest ahead of the interests of innocent people?*** That was his question he asked me. How indeed? Somehow the question asked years before came back. ***Who doesn't need more than baptism?*** Dave knew that keeping the faith involved a wrestling through one's life.

Jean had three small children, all of whom had noticeable learning disabilities. Not only that, her husband was an active alcoholic and former drug abuser. There was always a suspicion that his drug use had contributed to the children's learning disabilities. She confided that she knew the marriage was destructive for her and the children, and was setting a bad example for them. I remember her so well as she said: ***What choice do I have? I cannot raise three disabled children alone. I can't afford baby sitters, so I cannot get a job, and I cannot leave them alone. I have no choice. God has given me these children to raise.*** It was, and is, a heartbreaking story. I have no idea what has become of her or the family. Nor am I here to tell you she made the right decision when she decided to stay. I frankly don't know whether she did or did not. What I am here to tell you is that her decision was born of her struggle to be faithful to what she believed to be God's will for her. She knew in an existential way the question: ***Who doesn't need more than baptism?*** Faithful living is often a struggle.

I could tell story after story of people who knew the truth of the question. But there is no need. We all have our own stories of struggles, of wrestling with our faith. This awareness led me to our reading today from the Gospel of Mark.

*In those days Jesus came from Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'*

*And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.*

Did the baptism of Jesus actually unfold this way? The gospel writers themselves give different accounts of the baptism. What I do know is that the question is raised again.

*Who doesn't need more than baptism?* Who doesn't need more than church rituals and worship. Living faithfully in the world (the wilderness) takes wrestling as it were, with the devil, with evil, with war, poverty, bigotry, homophobia, xenophobia, and so many other manifestations of evil. It takes wrestling with oneself when life does not seem to make sense, when we cannot seem to find answers.

We need the rituals, the worship, the prayers, the community of others who struggle to follow the way of Jesus. But they are only the beginning of faith, the memory of them and the experience of them, point the way to wrestling with whatever comes our way. Paul seems to get it, when he asks within the reality of his time, of the inconsistencies, the questions, the times of faithfulness, *What then are we to say about these things?*

Do you remember his answer, as he wrestles, as he struggles? *If God is for us, who is against us?* Or we might say, if baptism and such are not enough, what is. His answer is to rely on the promise, *If God is for us, who is against us?* We can afford to make bad choices, afford to make mistakes, because there is that reality that we cannot afford to forget. It is the reality we call God, the reality of Love. For when we wrestle with whatever it is we struggle, we wrestle with seeking that which is of God, who is love. Our struggle is deciding the most loving thing to do in the situation at hand. Our response might be wrong, but if our response is guided by Love, we can trust this: *If God is for us, who is against us.*

In all our wrestling, may we come to say with Paul:

***For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus....***

For that my friends is where our baptisms, our professions of faith and the struggles that come with them, lead us. Who doesn't need to know that certainty? May we struggle until we find it. Amen