

“Responding to Baptism in Abundance”  
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes

Good morning! Welcome to Morgan Park Presbyterian Church on this special ordination Sunday! I am pastor Ben, and today I will be ordained as a teaching elder - a minister of word and sacrament - in recognition of our ministry here together at Morgan Park Presbyterian Church. I am especially grateful for the discernment of this community that has brought us together today and for all those who will be traveling today to be part of our ordination service today at 4pm here in this place.

Let us open our hearts to hear the Word of God.

Let us pray: Lord God, let the words of your servant’s mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Genesis 25:19-34

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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On a cold Sunday morning in December of 1985, a small bundle of curiosity named Benjamin Carl Snipes laid quietly in his parents arms while being baptized in front of the congregation of Midland United Church of Christ in Midland Michigan. That was me at about two months old. The story from my parents was that I was very well behaved, calm and quiet while my parents held me in front of the congregation and had water splashed on my head. My three year old sister at the time, however, was getting bored and perhaps saw this ritual act as a representation of the drifting focus in our family away from her and toward this new little bundle. I apologize to Katie, but the only other detail of my baptism story from my parents is that she left her place at my parent’s side, crawled under the communion table and threw her legs up in the air.

That was my baptism. All I know about it is what my parents have told me. And yet this strange moment in my first weeks of life is the foundation of my journey of faith that I will reaffirm today in the act of ordination.

Our book of Order says that Baptism is the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ. In baptism, all barriers of sin and brokenness that separate us from God fall away, providing connection to God and God’s love and grace. In baptism, we celebrate that God has claimed us as God’s own, even before we are able to respond in faith.

In our Reformed Tradition, we believe that no person can be worthy of this transformative act of baptism. There is no test, no requirement of speaking in tongues or even an affirmation of faith. In fact, in our tradition, the act of baptism is more an act of commitment and love on the part of the congregation and the parents than for the one being baptized. In baptism, we commit to nurturing the baptized person in the Christian life.

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We can baptize our babies, as I was baptized - quietly in my parent’s arms - as an affirmation of the greatness of God’s love - that covers us all. God sows the seed of faith indiscriminately among all people out of God’s love for each person on this earth. This seed of faith is formed out of God’s faith in us, which is constant and sure even when our faith in God is not.

Baptism celebrates God’s gift of grace and also God’s summons to respond to that grace. We are each invited into a covenant relationship with God and are then tasked with discerning how to follow the call of God as covenant partners seeking God’s kingdom here on earth. Our covenant relationship with God, celebrated in baptism, calls each Christian into a life of ministry. Our priesthood is a priesthood of all believers. God invites each of us to discern together how we live out Christ’s ministry here and now.

This is not something simple or black and white. Receiving God’s grace and figuring out how to respond is different for each of us. How could I ever have known what I was getting into when I was 8 weeks old? What about the millions of people who have left the church or live lives totally separate from Christianity? What about those who pray to God daily and still struggle with faith? Each of us have different challenges and choices in front of us.

None of us fully escape our slavery to sin, and yet, God still extends the seed of God’s love to each of us all the time. We celebrate this in our baptism, but we can renew our covenant no matter what day it is. We can work on accepting God’s grace for ourselves. We can work on discerning how to respond to God. We can work on finding healing for the brokenness we have received in our lives. And as we take on these works of faith, scripture reminds us that God is with us.

Working on a covenant relationship is something foundational to our faith tradition. Starting with Noah and then again with Abraham, God forms a covenant relationship with God’s people out of love. The story of Abraham’s grandchildren demonstrates some of the challenges of inheriting such a covenant of love.

Rebekah's children Jacob and Esau, in our scripture lesson from today, had a very special relationship to each other as children: they were twins. They grew in her womb together and grew up in their community together as well, and yet the order of their arrival at birth was used to determine their power and authority in the family.

I wonder, at what moment did Jacob and Esau go from seeing each other as brothers, as play mates, as equals to seeing each other as rivals or objects to be subjugated? What sin did Jacob inherit to covet his brother’s privilege, and what superiority did both brothers inherit to believe they were worthy of such privilege? Was this something they came to understand as teenagers or adults? Was their rivalry something they developed in the womb? It’s origin may be mythical, but the battle for power between these brothers will come to define their relationship and take them decades to work through to find peace.

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God placed God’s love and covenant in each of them indiscriminately in the miracle of their birth. They are already part of God’s promise to Abraham to make his descendants as numerous as the stars, and yet, the family tries to limit God’s love and covenant to a single male heir.

Esau comes to Jacob after a hunt, vulnerable to starvation, and Jacob uses this vulnerability to coerce Esau into relinquishing his birthright of property and title to Jacob. Within that inheritance, Jacob also discovers a covenant with God that transforms his life.

It seems like God’s seed of covenanted love is wasted on Isaac’s children who develop a lifelong feud, but there is hope even for this conflicted and holy family.

When we receive the Word of God in Jesus - through a sermon that makes sense, or reading scripture during a personal devotional, or experiencing the love of God in the actions of a stranger, or the cumulative effect of a life in Christian community - we act as host to the transformative love of God. We experience God planting the seed of faith in us - a seed that was planted in us long before we knew our own name.

From our experience as people of faith - people who have discovered this seed of faith planted in us, we might see something new in Jesus’ parable when he says, “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

If God is the sower and God’s Word is the seed, then what kind of ground would you be to receive this seed? Are you the rocky ground? Perhaps a home for hungry birds? Or are you the “good soil?”

Although scholars agree that the explanation of Jesus’ parable in today’s scripture is likely an editor’s commentary important to Matthew’s community - and not Jesus’ actual words, this interpretation of the parable that sees God as the sower and God’s Word as the seed still has relevance in our community.

Today we may act as fertile soil or we may be so broken by this world that we respond to the seed of faith more like a rocky path or a hungry crow.

We, however, are not stagnant beings - a pile of rocks condemned to a lifetime of dry, rocky hostility. Isaiah tells the exiled and suffering Israelites that “Every valley shall be lifted up,

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and every mountain and hill be made low." The only thing unchanging for God is God's love for humanity.

Today, some may be fertile soil for the seed of God's Word - ready to respond to God's grace with acts of faith, acts of love, acts of justice, acts of resistance to oppression and violence. Some of us may have been fueling this seed of faith in us with nurture and passion for years and years! But this seed was not just planted in some!

This seed was also planted in children who we have baptized. Some who are still in this room and some who may no longer feel welcome here. This seed was planted in children who grew up to commit unspeakable crimes in our community. This seed was planted in children who are older than us and younger than us. This seed was planted in children who believe church is a habit to maintain respectability. This seed was planted in children who grew up experiencing unspeakable violence in our community. This seed was planted in children who came to our community to seek refuge.

In the interpretation of the parable given in Matthew, each example of inhospitable ground is characterized not by the actions of the person it represents but by the context of their environment. The influence of persecution, the lure of riches, and the evil one act as coercive forces that deprive the person from becoming fertile soil for the seed of God.

We each have our own anxieties, fears and influences that challenge our ability to be fertile soil, and I believe that together we can tend the gardens of each other's hearts to create more space for love, create more space for grace, create more space for healing, so that we might find new ways to respond to God - new ways for God's love to grow in us.

So, in the interest of creating new soil with you today, I extend a second of many interpretations of Jesus' parable of the sower. Jesus usually left his parables open to interpretation, but always rich with challenge and destabilizing images in the face of social norms.

So, what if we are the sower, trying to sow our seed as indiscriminately as God?

Jesus was sharing this parable to be interpreted by his peasant audience about a topic they knew well: farming. What if they were this sower of seed? It might seem like they are wasting their time by scattering seed in so many infertile places, but imagine what happens when some of those seed do take root! In God's kingdom, the seeds that do have fertile soil might provide 100 times their yield in return! Returning a yield of 10 times what was planted may have been expected or hoped for, but 100 times is a much more miraculous abundance that would have challenged the assumed roles that each member of Jesus' agricultural society counted on.

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Can you imagine going to work for a season, but instead of your normal pay check, you are given 100 times that amount, even 10 times that amount? What would that change in your relationship to your labor? What would that change in your relationship to your employer?

For a peasant farmer, this sort of yield might shift their mindset from trying to pay off an impossible debt to their land owner to requesting to purchase the land for themselves. This abundance might flip the social norms of power and remove the contractual bonds that kept some in power and most unempowered. This might change one’s mindset from worrying about how they would afford their next meal to discerning how many guests they would invite to their next feast.

What would this kind of abundance change in your life? How might your priorities shift if worrying about your own survival were not so high on the to do list?

While faith in God might not cause our paycheck to increase in any way, Jesus calls us to imagine a life where our labor is not solely linked to participation in an economic system. Jesus calls us to be good stewards of the gifts and resources we have received and at the same time to consider how to use those gifts in a way that celebrates God’s abundance.

Love is unlocked within us when we experience God’s abundance. The seed of God’s love and grace is nurtured in ourselves and in others when we find ways to celebrate God’s abundance with those around us.

On this day of ordination, I experience God’s abundance in the relationships in my life that have brought me to this important day with each of you. I have had late night conversations with friends and mentors where anxieties were affirmed, where imaginings of God’s justice were challenged, where my gifts for ministry were revealed to me by those who know me best. I have received gifts of financial support and emotional support that made an impossible journey into an achievable challenge. The seed of faith in me was celebrated and nurtured before I even knew my own name.

Those who had gifts - gave them abundantly.

That is the story of Morgan Park Presbyterian Church as well. When fire destroyed this house of worship; when neighbors needed support, when health services were needed by the community, this congregation discovered an abundance of gifts to support and celebrate those around them. And in the giving of those gifts, new fertile ground was nurtured for the seed of God’s love in each of us.

Let us continue to discover the gifts of abundance among us today.

Amen

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