

“What IS this baptism thing?” based on Acts 19:1-7 and Mark 1:4-11

This week, statements were made that said that some people are more important than other people, and some places have people that matter while others don't. The statements made this week were a moral atrocity. While this was exceptionally direct and overt, unfortunately, such statements are made on a regular basis, most often in budgets.

This past Tuesday I went to the NY statehouse to advocate for fair funding of New York State schools. New York state schools are THE most segregated in the United States (you heard me correctly). While New York spends rather a lot on its public school systems, it does not spend that money equitably. Because of the hard work of education advocates (and multiple lawsuits), in 2007 New York State created a “foundation aid formula”. The formula was meant to counter two pieces of inequality: the reality that school district's primary funding comes from property taxes which can vary GREATLY between wealthy and impoverished communities; and that the needs of students can vary greatly between wealthy and impoverished communities.

The formula, carefully created, has never actually been funded. Instead, already wealthy (and usually white) school districts get a higher percentage of the money than average, while already impoverished (and particularly schools with many minority students) get a lower PERCENTAGE of the money than average. To get to particulars, the Schenectady City School District is underfunded by \$44 MILLION according to the foundation aid formula, like many upstate cities' schools are. That is, the New York government has an education budget that is as offensive as the language spoken in the Whitehouse this week.

Similarly, the United Methodist Church also FUNCTIONS as if some people matter more than others. I'm not just talking about the history of the Central Jurisdiction (if this is news to most of you, we'll do a second hour on it later), or pay gaps for clergy on the basis of race and gender, or any of the other multitude of issues within the United States. I'm not even ONLY talking about the discrimination of LGBTQIA+ people in the church. There are ALSO issues with how the church functions as a global church. Namely, our constitution differentiates power between churches and conferences in the United States and those in the rest of the world, and the church as a whole functions as if the churches outside the United States are our colonies. While we do have some United Methodists in Europe, the vast majority of United Methodists outside of the United States are in Africa and the Philippines. This means that global colonization history AND racism continue to impact our church in every day of its life, and the colonization AND racism are WRITTEN INTO OUR CONSTITUTION.

To put it bluntly, we are not yet living the dream that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. offered us.

But, we are still dreaming it. Within the church, the dream is powerfully held and advocated for by the Love Your Neighbor Coalition, methodized as “LYNC.” LYNC consists of: all of the racial ethnic caucuses in the United Methodist Church, 4 groups organizing around LGBTQIA+ rights

in the church, MFSA, Fossil Free UMC, and the UM association of ministers with disabilities. It is an amazing, profound, and inspiring group! LYNC looks and feels like the church as it should be – it is still messy with a lot of view points – but it is loving, respectful, and capable of growth. LYNC has JUST released a statement about the church it dreams of being a part of. LYNC's current work is centered on the African concept of “ubuntu, and early in the statement, it explains “ubuntu” by quoting Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

The first law of our being is that we are in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation... [Ubuntu] is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. It speaks about wholeness: it speaks about compassion. A person with ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole. They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they are.¹

I want to read you the abstract of LYNC's statement, because I think it is profound, because I think it dreams the church as God does, and because I think it contains truth beyond the bounds of the United Methodist Church. It isn't short, exactly, but it is as concise as a dream can be:

The United Methodist Church is in the midst of a once-in-a-generation opportunity. A harm has been named within the body and brought to light. How we respond will define our future. There are responses that will promote healing, restore relationships, restore our ubuntu, and lead to this struggle being remembered as a restorative struggle. And there are other responses that will amplify the pain. It is time to banish this period of legislated discrimination to the dustbins of our history.

Therefore, the Love Your Neighbor Coalition calls upon the Commission on a Way Forward and the Council of Bishops to develop a plan that maintains the UM connection and removes all forms of language that discriminates against LGBTQ persons from the Book of Discipline.

We call upon the delegates to the 2019 special session of General Conference to act to maintain the UM connection and remove all forms of language that discriminates against LGBTQ persons from the Book of Discipline.

Furthermore, we call upon all United Methodists to join together in love, grace, and compassion, to recognize “us” reflected in each other, and to work to strengthen our relationships and our United Methodist connection and restore our ubuntu, regardless of where we stand on the theological or political spectrums.

Finally, as we look beyond the 2019 General Conference, we call upon those who become delegates to the 2020 General Conference and upon all United Methodists to careful examination of other ways in which we harm our ubuntu, other ways in which we perpetuate

new and historic injustices against one another such as sexism, racism, misogyny and colonialism, and to join together to work toward our continuing restoration and sanctification in those regards as well.

(Amen) It is a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere, to dream and work with LYNC. In fact, I think it is a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere, to dream with God and work towards the kingdom.

The good news is, our baptisms calls us to seek a just (and anti-racist) world. Baptism not only welcomes us into the church, with its radical love and inclusion, but it welcomes us into the work of creating the kingdom and working with God to fulfill God's dreams.

In our Acts passage, the newly baptized are said to prophesy. As Rev. Dr. Ruthanna B. Hooke, explains, “in Luke's gospel and Acts, to prophesy is to speak about the present; it is to speak God's name on behalf of God's work in the world.”² She goes on to say, “The gift of prophesy calls us to proclaim what God is doing even now in our world, and to do so with boldness. This Spirit moves us to proclaim God's good news to the poor and liberation to the captives. This gift empowers us to 'speak truth to power,' confronting the 'rules and authorities' of this world with the revolutionary message of the gospel, and trusting that when we are called up on to offer this witness the Holy Spirit will give us the words to say.”³ From that definition, the baptized are CALLED to prophesy, even when the truth we speak is uncomfortable for others to hear. We are CALLED to seek justice, including with our words. Of course, the more difficult part is finding the words, and the time, and the way to speak. Those are the struggles of day to day life of faith. The blessing here is the promise that God is working with us and through us to help us find the ways to speak!

In Mark, we hear a story of Jesus's baptism. The New Oxford Annotated Bible says of the passage, “Jesus himself is baptized into the renewal movement that began before him.”⁴ This is a very important statement! First of all, Jesus was a Jewish man baptized by a Jewish man, and the first meaning of the ritual was found in their shared Jewish routes. Secondly, John the Baptist was leading a renewal movement in hopes of helping the people be freed from oppression. By the best work of scholars, we think that Jesus was baptized by John as a ritual of becoming a disciple of John's. It is so helpful to remember that he was learning from a person already in the movement, even as he eventually became the teacher. In that way, Jesus is like the rest of us: both a learner in and a teacher in the movement we're a part of.

This baptism thing is an entrance into the work of the Body of Christ – the work of dreaming with God and building God's kingdom. It is work that decries racism, sexism, homophobia, and all other claims that one human is more important than another. The final statement of our Gospel passage is, “This is my child, the beloved, with whom I am well-pleased.” We, as disciples of Jesus, believe those to be INHERENT to God's nature – a blessing God has spoken over each and every human being. It is our life-long goal to learn to treat each other as such – both individually as parts of our society and church.

As LYNC says, may we remember that we are called to “careful examination of other ways in which we harm our ubuntu, other ways in which we perpetuate new and historic injustices against one another such as sexism, racism, misogyny and colonialism, and to join together to work toward our continuing restoration and sanctification in those regards as well.” May we use our voices to prophesy whenever a statement is made – directly or indirectly – that falsely claims that some people aren't beloved by God. Because, dear ones, we are ALL God's children, and as such, beloved. Thanks be to God. Amen

1Archbishop Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope For Our Time* (Doubleday, 2005).

2Ruthanna B. Hooke, “Pastoral Perspective on Acts 19:1-7” in *Feasting on the Word Year B Volume 1* edited by David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville and London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 230.

3Hooke, 234.

4Richard A. Horsely, “Mark” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Edition*, edited by Michael D. Coogan (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 58 New Testament.

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Pronouns: she/her/hers

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