

The Unbaptized Hand

EPHESIANS 1:15-23

¹⁵I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²²And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

In 1925 the world was still reeling from World War I and was facing global financial collapse. What was supposed to have been a war to end all wars was anything but. Nations were stockpiling weapons on an unprecedented level. And countries were frightened and angry and electing people who gave voice to this anger. Italy elected Benito Mussolini, who, in that fateful year adopted the title “Il Duce”, “the leader”, “the king”, and told the people that democracy was a mess- too many arguments and gridlock. He said it was time for a strong leader who would be tough, who would make decisions. Of course he didn’t mention the price of this kind of leadership was your voice- your right to express yourself, your right to vote. I hear people complain so much today about how horrible our government is and what idiots everyone in congress is- but you know there’s something far worse than a bunch of idiots running the place. It’s one idiot running the place- one idiot who welcomes any and all opinions...just as long as they line up with his.

Well in 1925 something else happened, too. After Mussolini declared himself “Il Duce”, dictator, the head of the Roman Catholic church, Pope Pious XI, probably the only man

in Italy who could do this without being disappeared or worse, spoke out. Pope Pious XI spoke out against Mussolini, and against the nationalism he saw raging all around, most ominously in Germany. And he declared that for the Christian there is no king, no ruler, no “Il Duce” who is absolute here on earth. There is one king- the king of kings. The prince of peace Jesus Christ. And, as a reminder to us, and as a warning to any who would set themselves up over anyone else, he declared the Sunday before Advent would be known as Christ the King Sunday.¹ And you know, Presbyterians in general are not big on popes. But we really liked this idea- we liked it so much that every Sunday before Advent, we celebrate Christ the King Sunday.

And this is why we read texts like the one from Paul to the Ephesians. Paul describes Jesus as seated on the right hand of God in the heavenly places. He declares Jesus as being “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.” And further Paul says, “God has put all things under Jesus’ feet.” Take that “Il Duce’s” of the world.

Now I like this idea. I do. I like this idea of remembering that whoever has power over our lives- whether our elected leaders, or multinational corporations, or whoever- I like this idea of remembering that no matter how important they may seem to be at the time that God is God and they are not.

And yet, I have to admit- this day makes me a little nervous, too. All this language of authority and power and dominion, even though Paul is talking about Jesus it makes me nervous,

¹ http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_pi11qp.htm

too. Ephesians makes it sound as if there is no place you can go, no place you can flee that Jesus won't be looking down on you- ruling over you, eavesdropping on the thoughts of your heart with enough knowledge about us to make Google blush. And while I guess I'd rather have Jesus than Mussolini be king over me...I guess if I had a choice, I'd probably prefer neither.

Yeah, if it were up to me, I'd probably prefer a little more distance, a little more privacy. I'd probably like to be able to keep my options open a little bit more, if I could.

See, I'm the kind of guy who likes to sit on the edge of meetings when I can- so if I need to escape I can just slip out. Like at Presbytery, my standard role is to sit with at least one of my friends in the back on the edge and keep a running commentary on what's happening somewhat akin to those old cranky guys on the muppets- Statler and Waldorf. I like to say that my friends and I laugh a lot at Presbytery...we just don't always laugh at the same time everyone else is. And I figure since I chair the dang COM and have to get up there in front of everybody give a report myself- well fair enough.

And I'm not the only one who feels like this. A little over 500 years ago one of the greatest leaders the world has ever seen was Ivan the Great in Russia. Ivan the Great did what no one else in the world ever had done before- he united the Russian people and defeated the Tartars, the remnants of the Mongol horde who swept through Russia with Ghenkis Khan. He was known as "the gatherer" because the different Russian factions were famously and fiercely independent.

So, Ivan was a warrior, he was a strategist, and he was a great politician, in the best sense of that word. But there was one thing he hadn't achieved. In order for him to truly be a success in the eyes of the Russian people- he needed to create a dynasty. He needed to have an

heir. And he'd been so busy running around routing enemies he just hadn't been able to keep his profile current on Match.com. Fortunately, Ivan had people who were looking out for him. And his "people" wind up finding a Greek princess who is just perfect- she's beautiful, she's the right age, and she's royal. And she hadn't apparently yet heard of how cold St. Petersburg gets in February. The only hitch was that she was Greek Orthodox. And if Ivan wanted to marry her, he would need to be rebaptized in the Greek Orthodox faith. But if Tartars didn't scare Ivan, a bunch of Greek Orthodox priests weren't going to either. So he agreed.

So here's the scene. Ivan takes 500 of his picked men down to Greece for the baptism and the wedding. The Greek church shows up with the Archbishop and 500 priests. And because baptism in the Greek Orthodox tradition is full immersion, the only place big enough was the Mediterranean Sea. Can you imagine the scene? 500 Russian soldiers in their crimson full dress regalia. 500 Orthodox priests in their jet black cassocks. All of them standing on a pristine white sandy beach being kissed by the azure blue sea.

And that's when they noticed it. That's when the bishops noticed that the men were all wearing their swords- the hilts glinting in the sun. They were soldiers. Of course. Why didn't they think of this. See, the Greek Orthodox church actually believed Jesus when he said if you live by the sword you will die by the sword, and all that love your enemy jazz. Those priests would no more baptize those swords than they would Satan himself. But those Russian soldiers weren't about to unbuckle their swords, either. They loved those swords more than they loved anyone else in the world. No, it was a showdown at club med.

So Ivan conferred with the archbishop talking by themselves for a few minutes. Ever the smooth talker, Ivan brokered a deal.

Immediately, the archbishop ordered his priests to lead all of the Russians into the water. And as they waded in, the Russians began to draw their swords. For a split second it looked like the soldiers were going to wreak havoc. But they raised their swords in their hands, and they kept them raised- as high as they could. And those priests, understanding immediately, immersed those Russians in the warm Mediterranean water- baptizing everything but their sword wielding hands.²

Every one of us who is here this morning, unless you were just absolutely dragged by force (I'm looking at a few of the men...), most of you wants to follow after the way of Jesus Christ. You're here because most of you wants him to be at the center of your life- not money, not status, not achievement. Jesus. And yet, while every one of us wants this, we also don't want this. Most of us wants to follow after his way, but there's at least a part that really doesn't. There's at least a part of us that would like to stay unbaptized.

We like the idea of Jesus being our friend, our traveling companion. But our king- who demands our all. Well, that's just uncomfortable.

And so we come this morning, but perhaps not all of us. What is it that you'd like to keep, to keep above the waters of baptism? It's stewardship season. How many unbaptized wallets or purses are there, for instance? Hey, Jesus can have my body on Sunday morning- I mean isn't it enough we show up for worship? But my money- hey...that's mine. How many of us would prefer to keep that part of our lives, the financial part, separate? Unbaptized?

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. How many unbaptized thoughts, unbaptized prejudices are here this morning?

² John M. Drescher, Why I Am A Conscientious Objector (Morgantown, PA: Masthof Press, 1982), p. 35.

Or course, for some of us it isn't a part of us we wish we could keep for ourselves- it's a part of us we're ashamed of, a part of us that hurts, that we'd like to keep tucked away, hidden from all eyes- even God's eyes. This is what we'd like to keep out of sight and unbaptized.

The part of me that I hold up above the waters, the part of me I do my best to keep unbaptized, tucked away and hidden- it's my fear of ever being wrong. Now, I don't need to pretend I know everything- I'm fine with not knowing everything. But things I think I *should* know- well I had better be right about those. I am so afraid of appearing wrong or unprepared- even for a moment. I do just about everything I can to be as intellectual and well studied as I can. I always want to be one of the smartest people in the room- and in some of my worst moments I have actually made sure people know what books I have read and what schools I have attended- just to make sure they knew.

See, I grew up in a fairly wealthy suburb like Tualatin. But my family was just barely on the edge. When my dad lived with us he had a hard time keeping a job. Then, when we were on our own, my mom just made enough to pay the mortgage. She didn't buy clothes for herself. I was lucky and got hand me downs from one of the women at her office who had a son a few years older than me. Just before my dad left he gutted both of our bathrooms thinking he was going fix them up. After he left we lived with unfinished bathrooms for years. My mom finally had to ask her brothers for help.

Now I don't think of us as poor. We always had food. And we went to Pennsylvania every year to see family. But we didn't have anything extra. Unlike the kids I went to school with who always had so much, kids who seemed to have not just cars, but NICE cars, we just

didn't. When I turned 16 my mom and I shared a little Pontiac that looked like a giant egg on wheels. But hey it was OUR giant egg on wheels, thank you very much.

And so, I grew up feeling a little less than sometimes, knowing I didn't have the right clothes, knowing my folks didn't have all the right stuff, knowing I didn't totally fit in- but you know if I couldn't have all the right things, there was one thing I had that no one else did. I was smart. School always came easy to me. I always knew the right answers- sometimes more than my teachers. I remember doing a report in elementary school on an important historical figure. And on one of those trips to Pennsylvania I learned that in America oil was first discovered in Pennsylv- in Titusville to be exact. And the man who discovered this and made it useful was a guy named Francis Drake. And I did this big report on him, and my teacher actually called my mom to argue with her, absolutely convinced that surely oil must have been discovered in Texas first- not Pennsylvania. Oh the Texas education system...

And whenever anyone wanted to look down on me- when I looked down on myself, well I could always console myself with my intelligence. I decided I would be smarter, know more, be sharper, and always be right- at least about the things I cared about. I would always appear in control and prepared and excellent. And while this can be a good things- often I haven't used these gifts in Christlike ways. I've used them against others rather than in service.

And this fear of being (gasp) wrong, of appearing incompetent- it has kept me from learning at times. It's hard to learn when you're supposed to know everything already. Worse, it's kept me from being in relationship. It's very hard for me to ask for help- because I have to ask for help, it means admitting I need help. And while I'm happy to offer help, it's hard to ask for it.

So often it's like I wade into the waters, wanting to follow after the way of Jesus, only keeping this part of me that's afraid of ever appearing incompetent held up above my head. Of course it takes a lot of energy to do that- and when my hands are busy with that, they sure aren't able to hold anyone's, or be held.

This last week an absolute nightmare happened for me. So, Melis was out of town on an awesome trip to New York, learning really cool things and meeting great people. And one of the things I pride myself on is the ability to do everything I'm trying to do- be a good pastor, be a superdad, and run the Committee on Ministry for the Presbytery, and all with one hand tied behind my back. And yeah, maybe I don't do some of those things perfectly- but none of the balls ever get dropped. Except this week- well they all kind of came crashing down. Session was on Tuesday, and if you don't know, the session is the governing body that runs the church. Session meetings are a big deal to me. Indeed, one of the things I do best is run meetings. I always show up early and mentally go through the agenda a bunch of times visualizing how things will go. I like to get the tables set up with water and glasses, and just make sure everything is ready.

Well on Tuesday my sitter was supposed to arrive at 6:15. This would give me plenty of time to say good-bye to the kids and get over to the church and get everything ready. 6:15 hits. No sitter. No worries. It was foggy. People run late. 6:20. Um... I call and leave a message. I check my email. Nothing. 6:25 comes. No sitter. I'm getting pretty nervous at this point and start preparing the kids for the possibility we were going to have to figure something out. 6:30 hits. I call again saying I was going to have to leave in a few minutes if they didn't

show. 6:35. 6:40. So I throw the kids in the car, race off to the church, trying to think what in the world am I going to do?

I have a movie for Will and Ella- but Brynne's not into that yet. I tear in, Tuesday's Treasures are here. And I'm running around, completely flustered- I stick the kids in a room. Brynne is freaking out. Everyone's there for the meeting. Truly- for the man who likes to at least to appear on top of it, prepared, and brilliant- especially for my main meeting- this was a worst case scenario. The utter, chaotic mess of my life on full display.

But of course you can probably guess what happened. Our elders were patient. Our elders were kind. Our elders were helpful. Katrina tried to sit with Brynne. But when it was clear she just wanted me- the other elders went and got the rocking chair from the nursery, and we just shifted the seating around, and I just moderated with Brynne in my lap. And in a quieter than normal voice, we approved a new eagle project, we heard reports, made plans, and did our best to discern where the Spirit is leading us as a congregation. And not because I was prepared. I wasn't. And not because I was particularly brilliant. I wasn't. And certainly not because I was uber competent. I certainly wasn't that on Tuesday. It all worked because whether we like it or not- the parts of ourselves that we try to keep from God, the parts of ourselves of our lives that we try to keep unbaptized- well Christ is king over those parts, too.

And when our worst fears are realized, and whatever it was we had hoped no one would ever see becomes known, and our mess is on full display for all the world to see- when we are loved anyway by the people around us, when we are loved *anyway*, we will wonder what we were so worried about in the first place.

This morning we confess that Christ is king. This man of lonely places who came to serve, not to be served- he is the one who sees over all, who is above every name that is named, both in this age, and in the one to come. And when Christ, who came not to condemn but to love, is king- then we can try and keep parts of ourselves from him, we can try to keep parts of our lives unbaptized, but there's no need. All we're doing is missing out on grace. **Amen.**