

**Romans 6:1-11**

**Luke 3:1-22**

**January 29, 2017**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **IN LINE WITH SINNERS**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

On Saturday, November 21, 2015, a church in Harlem in New York City overflowed with sinners lined up for the chance to scrub their records clean. Anthony King, 28, said, “It’s a pretty long line but it’s a good idea.” Another sinner in line, 25-year-old Letice Yates said, “It’s time to clean up my act and change my life.” Wouldn’t that be something? To have people lined up outside the church doors, waiting to scrub their records clean, clean up their acts, and change their lives?

Actually, what happened in Harlem on that Saturday in November wasn’t exactly as I have presented it. Here are the opening sentences of the newspaper article about the event: “A Harlem church overflowed with sinners Saturday as hundreds of petty criminals lined up for the chance to scrub their records clean. The one-day event was launched by the Manhattan District Attorney’s office to give New Yorkers the opportunity to resolve warrants stemming from low-level crimes such as public urination, public drinking, and pot possession. As many as 200 scofflaws stood in a line that stretched down West 124<sup>th</sup> Street, outside Soul Saving Station Church, to gain their absolution.” The article ended this way: “Some people were a little wary of the opportunity, thinking it might be a trap. There were no arrests made during the amnesty event, the first of its kind in Manhattan.”<sup>1</sup>

Standing in line with sinners — That image stuck in my mind as I read today’s gospel story about John the Baptist preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Can you see yourself standing in a line of sinners?

Last Sunday afternoon, a church in Leland, NC was full of sinners lined up for the chance to “receive the sustaining presence of Christ, remember God’s covenant promise, and pledge their obedience anew.”

Dr. Doug Cushing was installed as the first pastor of the bridge Presbyterian Church in Leland. Doug has served as the organizing pastor of this new church development for about three years. Sunday’s installation service was the answer to many prayers and a time for great celebration.

During the worship service, we celebrated the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. Doug instructed the gathered folks that we would take the bread and cup by coming forward, tearing a piece of bread and dipping it in the cup. He then invited us to come to our Lord’s table: “Come forward and receive the bread and cup.”

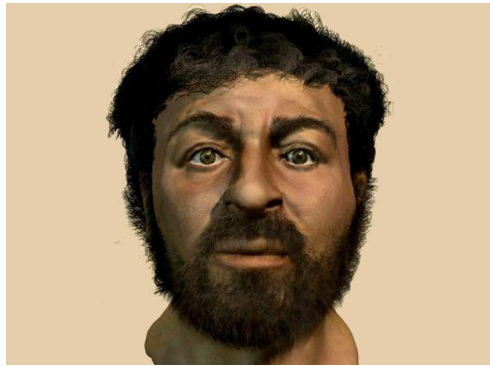
This was a rare and welcome opportunity for me to be on that end of communion. That typically happens only at presbytery meetings or on pastor retreats. Whenever we receive the bread and cup by intinction, I like to watch all of the people going forward. I like being in the line, waiting my turn to tear the bread and dip it in the cup and hear

the words, “The body and blood of Christ for you.” As a sinner myself, it’s a powerful experience to be in line with a bunch of sinners.

Imagine the scene there in the wilderness by the Jordan River. Imagine Jesus standing in line, waiting his turn to be baptized by John. What do you see? What do you think the people standing in line with Jesus saw when they looked at him?

Did you know that we have no physical description of Jesus in the gospels? The closest we come to any kind of description is when Mark in his gospel and Philip in the Book of Acts cite the Suffering Servant passage from the prophet Isaiah: “Just as there were many who were astonished at him — so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals . . . He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.” (Isaiah 52:14; 53:2-3)

But what did Jesus look like? Well, he probably looked like any other 1st century A.D. Palestinian Jew. Look at the picture in the upper left hand corner on the front page of today’s bulletin.



Is that what Jesus looked like? Who knows? That picture was generated by Richard Neave, a retired medical artist from the University of Manchester, England, in 2001 for a BBC documentary. Mr. Neave used an actual skull of a 1st century Palestinian man. He said, “I made a plaster cast of the skull which gives me something to work on. Then I put clay over it and, using soft tissue measurements, build up the anatomy of the face. Inevitably there are some areas where you have to speculate, particularly if parts of the skull are missing.” Mr. Neave did not make the claim that this is actually Jesus’ face, but that, if Jesus looked like a man of his time and place in 1st century A.D. Palestine, he might have/probably looked like this.<sup>2</sup>

It’s different, isn’t it? The point is, unless you were a neighbor of Jesus from Nazareth standing in line with him by the Jordan River, you probably wouldn’t have noticed anything different about him. At this point in the gospel, Jesus has yet to begin his public ministry of preaching, healing, and teaching. The general public wouldn’t have known about him. He was/is one of us. As *The Message* translates John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”

Wait a minute! Even if Jesus looked like a man of his time and place, which meant he looked like everybody else in line for baptism that day, wasn't he different? John "went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." (Luke 3:3) Why did Jesus have to be baptized? After all, as Hebrews 4:14-15 reminds us, "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."

Why did Jesus have to be baptized? It depends on what you mean by "have to." Already in the time when the gospels were being written, this was an embarrassing question for the church. In Matthew's story, when Jesus goes to be baptized by John, John protests and says, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus tells him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." (Matthew 3:14-15)

In other words, it was "necessary, the right thing to do," just as the boy Jesus "had to" be in the temple, being about his Father's business. This is what Jesus chose to do. He submitted to God's will and stood in solidarity with us. As someone has said, "Jesus comes to join and not abandon the people of God. Jesus wasn't ashamed, he was there with everybody to be baptized. Jesus simply got in line with everybody who had been broken by the wear and tear of the world." Which is why the letter to the Hebrews can go on to say, "Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." (4:16) That's why it is such good news that Jesus stood in line with sinners that day by the Jordan, waiting to get baptized. That's why it is such good news that Jesus still stands with sinners like you and me today.

In the last couple of weeks, we have heard from Luke's gospel that "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him . . . and Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." When Jesus had been baptized, a heavenly voice told him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Maybe God the Father was well pleased that Jesus had gone to the water to be baptized. But God was probably most pleased about the arc of Jesus' life and what it suggested about his upcoming ministry.

Jesus standing in line with sinners is a preview of what is to come. That is the complaint lodged against him throughout the gospel of Luke:

\* When Jesus and his disciples went to dinner at the house of Levi the tax collector, along with a large crowd of tax collectors, the Pharisees and their scribes complained to the disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors?" (Luke 5:29-30)

\* When a woman from the city barged in and bathed Jesus' feet at the dinner party at the Simon the Pharisee's house, the host thought to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him — that she is a sinner." (Luke 7:39)

\* When all the tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus, the Pharisees and scribes grumbled, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2)

\* When Jesus invited himself to dinner at the home of the tax collector Zacchaeus, everybody grumbled, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:6-7)

Do you wonder what Jesus thought about as he stood in line with sinners and looked at all of them? Jesus once told his disciples a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector praying in the temple. The Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people; thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” (Luke 18:11) If anyone in history could have ever prayed that Pharisee’s prayer in all truth and sincerity, it was Jesus. But, not only did Jesus never pray that way, his life, ministry, and death showed just the opposite reaction to the people in line with him:

- \* he came to be baptized with all the people

- \* he came as an act of solidarity with a nation and world of sinners

- \* he got in line with a bunch of sin-sick people who were looking for a new beginning and a return to God

- \* he identified with the broken sinners who needed God.

The beautiful Christ hymn in Philippians 2 puts it this way: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.” (2:5-8)

Even though our own baptisms and those of our children are occasions for great celebration as we are reminded, “You are children of God,” baptism reminds us of the great cost of God’s love in the life and death of his Beloved Son. In his letter to the Christians at Rome, just before the section Ann read this morning about dying and rising with Christ in baptism, the apostle Paul writes, “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.” (Romans 5:6-10)

Aren’t you glad that Jesus got in line with sinners like you and me that day by the Jordan River?

***Let us pray: Holy God, you sent your Son to be baptized among sinners, to seek and save the lost. May we, who have been baptized in his name, never turn away from your world, but reach out in love, by the mercy of Christ our Lord. Amen.***

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Melkorka Licea, "Sinners line up outside church to resolve low-level crimes," November 21, 2015, [www.nypost.com](http://www.nypost.com).

<sup>2</sup>Michael Morrow, "Experts use forensics tests to discover what Jesus Christ may have look like," December 16, 2015, [www.news.com.au](http://www.news.com.au).