

“The Boundaries of Blessings”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

BASED ON THE THEME, “NEW BOUNDARIES FOR A NEW YEAR”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Luke 3:15-22 NRSV

¹⁵As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶John answered all of them by saying, “I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people. ¹⁹But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, ²⁰added to them all by shutting up John in prison.

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

What are the boundaries of blessings? We talk of baptism as a sign of God’s blessing, because God spoke these words of blessing to Jesus at his baptism. Are those words the only blessing we can expect from God? Is that the limit, the boundary of God’s blessings? And what do we do to share that blessing? Do we set up boundaries about who can be blessed and who can’t, or who can give blessings and who can’t?

I just got back from my “boundary training” in Orlando this past Thursday. As I promised you it did not involve canoeing or bungee jumping. It was interesting and a good review of the information I have learned in previous training. Primarily it was reminding us

that we must be ever vigilant not to wander over boundaries because of our own needs. I think there may be an opportunity to do a whole message or maybe extend this series to talk about the ways our society has wandered all over boundaries of proper behavior. We often do some very strange things to satisfy our own needs.

But that isn’t really my focus this morning, although I do want to start with this morning’s Scripture and the strangeness that is John the Baptist. Whenever he shows up in Scripture you can bet that strangeness isn’t far away. In some reports his strange way of dressing and eating is emphasized. He wore camel hair suits and ate locusts. In other reports it is his preaching. He calls the people

who come to see him a brood of vipers and what is more strange they seem to love it because they chase him all over the countryside to hear him preach and have him baptize them. In this passage it reports his run in with Herod that results in his incarceration. But that isn't the focus of our questions about the boundaries of blessings. Our focus is on that moment when Jesus is baptized and God says, "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

I think the first question is whether God's blessings are limited to certain people who have certain beliefs. Many of us have been turned off by the exclusivism of some who want to use catch phrases to define the boundaries of faith and God's blessings. Anthony Robinson says when he was a young minister, "a group of angry church members confronted" him. They demanded to know if he was 'born again.' Robinson says what they were asking was whether he was one of them or not, whether he was "in their camp" or not. He says, to him, 'Born again' sounded like a slogan or a code, a way of saying who was in and who was not."

Robinson said this phrase came alive for him some years later. In fact, it became a way of expressing blessing and not exclusion, when he heard a story of a 13-year-old girl had made her way from the eastern side of Berlin to a Christian community in West Berlin just after the Berlin wall fell. She found shelter there. This child's mother had sold her into prostitution several years before. Her life was scarred in ways I cannot even imagine. One day that Christian

community was celebrating a baptism. "The pastor poured water into the font and as he did so he spoke of being 'born again from above.' Sitting near the back, the 13-year-old girl listened to his words.

"After the service, she went to the pastor who stood near the font. Shyly, she asked, 'Can I be born again?' For her, the words were not a formula or a slogan. They were not code words. They were truth and life. For her they were words of blessing. The answer of course was, 'Yes.'" She could be born again from above and she could be baptized. The boundaries of God's blessing included her. We cannot let others steal the power of God's blessings from us, nor can we let our own assumptions about others steal their blessing. Let us just be sure that we offer people God's blessings without our personal boundaries getting in the way.

On the UCC website there is an article about the radical power of baptism and its blessing. It says, "Today, seeing a baptism of an infant is usually a lovely event. Even if the baby cries from the chilly water, "ooohs" and "aaahs" of the congregation still fill the sanctuary. Our history, however, is filled with stories, not so sweet, of how radical, even politically-world-shaking, baptisms can be.

"Baptism for enslaved people in colonial and antebellum America was a radical event. The meaning of Baptism was debated by those in power. Should slaves be baptized? Does being baptized in Christ make one free in this world as well as the next? The answer by many in power was 'no.' As early as 1639, Maryland was the first colony to

specifically state that baptism as a Christian did not make a slave free.

“In 1883, following the emancipation of slaves, Frederick Douglass, the famous orator, teacher, and former slave, pointed to how Baptism challenged the institution of slavery. At the Congregational Church in Washington D.C., Douglass declared, ‘Baptism was then a vital and commanding question, one with which moral and intellectual giants of the day were required to grapple... When a heathen ceased to be a heathen and became a Christian, he could no longer be held as a slave.’”

“At another lecture Douglass revealed in more detail the threat of Baptism to slavery. The language seems strange and archaic today, but reveals the radical impact of Baptism at that time. ‘For to baptize the Negro and admit him into membership in the Christian church was to recognize him as a man, a child of God, an heir of Heaven, redeemed by the blood of Christ, a temple of the Holy Ghost, a standing type and representative of the Savior of the world, one who, according to the apostle Paul, must be treated no longer as a servant, but as a beloved brother. Viewed in this light, his admission to baptism, and to the church was a matter of the gravest consideration It would impair the value of the slave,... if the Negro is to be regarded as a Christian, ... the Negro Christian could not be bought and sold, enslaved and whipped... From every view, [the slave owners] could then take the proposition to baptize the Negro was rank radicalism

and deserved stern resistance at its inception.’¹

God’s blessings are radical and the way they depart from human boundaries challenges us to rethink our boundaries. It invites us to consider new ways we can live out our baptism as a blessing in the world. One of the things we believe about baptism is that it is also our call to ministry. Each of us as a baptized believer is called to engage in ministry. That is why our Vision Statement includes the part about each of us using our talents for ministry. We believe everyone has a ministry using the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

I have been thinking this week about how the next generation is going to change our world. They already are. But in connection with the Worship Grant I have been struggling with how we can be faithful to God’s call to prepare the way for this next generation to come into worship. I truly believe we must ask ourselves how can we create a worship or partner with them to create worship that is meaningful and attractive to them? Otherwise, fifteen years from now there will only be the last few of us left who still like things they way they always have been. We may be tempted to despair over the changes that young people are making to the world. We may think they will somehow be disastrous. I am sure this now qualifies me as an old, uh, “fuddy-duddy,” but I am struggling to figure out what the future will hold for Arlington Congregational Church and those of us

¹ <http://www.ucc.org/vitality/what-matters/we-are-one-at-baptism-and-at.html>

who are comfortable with the world as it used to be. Then I read a story that gives me such a sense of hope I realize it is a blessing that opens up the boundaries of my mind and spirit.

Colton Roe is a 13 year-old football player. Listen to what he says: “In life, as a man, it will never be about you. It’s about the people you serve, the man standing next to you. On the field, it’s not about you, it’s about the 10 other guys on the field with you.” Colton may be 13-years-old but he has created a campaign to feed the hungry using his talents.

You see, Colton is a quarterback for his football team. Here’s his latest stats: He completed 21 of 31 passes for \$2,700 and 27 well-fed families. You see Colton is working to fight hunger with his ‘Pennies for Passing’ campaign - a program where he collects pledges based on his performance on the football field. He has been doing this for more than three years and has raised more than \$6,500. In case you thought you didn’t hear right, that means he started doing this when he was ten.

Colton put together his two passions, football and serving others. Like a walk-a-thon, he planned to receive pledged pennies for each yard thrown. Colton would use his elementary school’s morning announcements to get the word out. Then Colton went public. Some of his fellow students would give him envelopes with loose change and lunch money. Every little bit helped ‘move the chains,’ as their slogan goes.

Then Colton and his teammates started knocking on doors. Ten dollars

from 10 people and a family would be fed through the holidays. Colton gave the money to an existing charity “Food for Others,” which bought and distributed the food. At times when there wasn’t enough Colton threw in a \$20. Someone else needed it more. The current economy has slowed the giving but Colton isn’t giving up.²

So when we think about the boundaries of blessings, whether we are a young person or an old person we need to remember not to put boundaries on God’s blessings. As Colton says, “In life... it will never be about you. It’s about the people you serve, the man standing next to you.” We need to remember that as we think about how we will craft worship for the next generation. I can’t think of a greater blessing this church could strive for than to help raise the next generation of Colton Roe’s.

John’s strange words have been interpreted many ways. In the end, whatever other strangeness John uttered or did, he said, “there is one coming after me....” The same is true for us – there are generations coming after us and the boundaries of God’s blessings include them. And we must do two things. We must be sure we open the door to God’s blessings for them to be included and we must be sure that we are open to the blessings they bring us and the blessing they can be to others as they change the world in ways we cannot even imagine right now. Remember, like us, they are God’s beloved too. AMEN.

² James Pallitto, “Character Counts: 13-year-old Fights for Families,” huskerlandpreps.rivals.com.