

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
July 14, 2019

Abide in His Word

John 8:31-38

As our bulletin indicates, we're anticipating next Sunday's service of baptism for Abby Rogerson. This is always a joyful occasion to give thanks for God's work in the life of an individual who has come to faith in Jesus Christ. Baptism is a public declaration of faith, and a promise to walk in newness of life. It signifies the believer's union with Christ in his death and resurrection, as well as union with the community of Christ's people, the church. The church is the fellowship of believers, the family of God where we grow in grace and mature in discipleship.

Several years ago, particularly in churches across Europe, there was a rise in the number of people who had once identified themselves with the Christian faith but now wanted to formally sever their ties with the church. Though it wasn't the only issue, clergy sexual misconduct was one of the primary reasons some people chose to officially exit the community of disciples. They opted to be "de-baptized." In some cases, this involved going to court to have one's name permanently deleted from church membership records. In other cases, there were websites offering informal de-baptism certificates.

Some church leaders responded by stressing baptism's religious meaning, which goes way beyond just an administrative transaction. In other words, baptism is a practice that holds great spiritual significance and points to God's presence and action in the life of the church and those who comprise it. Some churches have even used the wave of interest in de-baptism as an opportunity to take a look at their need for revitalization and fresh strategies of evangelism. As one parish priest said in trying to put a positive angle on the situation, "What is striking today is that those who want to be Christian really want to be Christian. I rejoice in the fact that people are free to choose."¹

Though I haven't heard much about a de-baptism movement here in America, there's no doubt that here in our country, the number of people who describe themselves as religiously affiliated continues to shrink. There has been a steady rise in the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation, often referred to as "nones." The good news, however, is that those who belong to a religion in a deep way are just as firmly committed to their faith as they were in the past. So overall, religion may be on the decline, but those who hold to a particular faith do so as strongly as ever.

I think these movements and trends in religious affiliation reveal both the potential strength and the potential weakness of religious ties. On the one hand, someone can end up just loosely connected to the church, for various reasons, instead of being tightly bound to the community of Christ's people. They might even make an exit, formally or by neglect. On the other hand, someone can cultivate a deep, strong connection with the church, and over time become more and more committed to the life of the community of disciples. And ultimately, isn't that what Jesus calls for? He wants us to be more than just people who have a religious affiliation. He wants us to be disciples.

Don't get me wrong, having a religious affiliation can be a good thing. But that affiliation needs to have depth and substance to it. It needs to be life-transforming. It needs to be

sustained over time in ways that lead to a stronger sense of connection with Christ and the fellowship of believers. In short, religious affiliation needs to take the shape of discipleship.

At the beginning of today's Scripture passage, Jesus says, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (vv. 31-32). Jesus makes these statements in the context of growing tension and discord between himself and those in his own religious tradition who didn't accept him as the revelation of God's will and purpose. In fact, this whole passage reflects the sense of rejection that many of Jesus' followers felt about being an excluded minority compared to the larger Jewish religious establishment. Important issues were at stake, such as who could rightfully claim to be Abraham's children, and how much weight should be attached to one's religious heritage and identity.

In the midst of these intensifying debates, Jesus reminds his hearers, then and now, that believing in him has to be more than just a casual association or a lightly held religious affiliation. In order for you and me to truly follow Jesus, we need to remember and reflect on the cost of being his disciples. Otherwise, we can end up claiming a Christian identity without really practicing a Christian way of life. This is the danger that we sometimes call "nominal Christianity." In other words, being a Christian in name only.

There are lots of factors that can contribute to being a nominal Christian. Some people identify themselves as Christian simply because our country and its culture once had a more Judeo-Christian orientation. Or perhaps because they live in a certain part of the country, such as the Bible Belt, where the Christian faith and the church have historically played a more dominant role. Some claim to be Christian primarily out of religious background or heritage. "Well, my grandparents were Baptist," they might say. Or, "My family has been in this church for generations." Some identify themselves with the name of Jesus Christ simply because they try to uphold a certain standard of morality. "I'm a good person." Or maybe they see themselves as Christian just because they go to church, though rarely, but at least on Christmas and Easter.

When it comes to nominal Christianity, we must always be prepared to speak truthfully and humbly. We don't want to think lightly, or speak arrogantly, of anyone's previous experience with the Christian faith, and especially with the life of the church. Plus, we in the church sometimes contribute to the problem of nominal Christianity by not presenting the gospel in its fullness, stressing simply the blessings that come with belief without emphasizing the great cost of commitment to Christ, and what he demands of us. On top of that, we frequently fail to embody and live out the way of Jesus Christ in our own lives and congregations.

The story is told about a man who had planned poorly, and suddenly realized that he needed some same-day dry cleaning before he left on a trip. He remembered that on the other side of town was a store with a huge sign, "One-Hour Dry Cleaners." He went by to drop off a suit, and after filling out the tag, told the clerk, "I need this in an hour." She said, "I can't get this back to you til Thursday." "I thought you did dry cleaning in an hour," said the man. "No," she replied, "that's just the name of the store."

Sometimes we who bear the name Christian fail to act like the one whose name we bear. We may display the sign on the front of our lives, but can't back it up with our performance. This can create confusion and disillusionment for those who might be considering faith in Christ, or for others who have already identified themselves in some way with Christ and his people. The fact is, some individuals don't go deeper into discipleship, and don't grow in relationship with Christ, because the church has failed them or mistreated them or in some other way not faithfully and lovingly integrated them into the worship and work of God's people.

And yet all this doesn't mean that we should take it lightly when individuals identify themselves as Christians but don't really make the Christian faith a central part of their lives. "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples," says Jesus. As I mentioned earlier, Jesus makes this statement in the context of growing division between those who believe in him and those who don't. The beginning of our text sounds like there has been at least a slight upturn in the number of people who believe in Jesus. More people are putting their faith in him. But Jesus expects people to do more than just walk down the aisle during the invitation hymn or step into waters of the baptistery. He tests their initial expression of faith. "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples."

"If" says Jesus, which means there's a possibility that an initial indication of faith may not actually result in a long-term commitment to him, especially when following him generates opposition and requires obedient sacrifice. But on the other hand, "If you hold to my teaching, . . ." The Greek word translated here as "hold to" can also mean "abide" or "remain." It's a word used often in John's Gospel to describe lasting connection to Jesus. In this case, it has to do with remaining in Jesus' word, staying with his word, not leaving his word. It means a permanent, not passing, relationship between Jesus' listeners and his word. And his word isn't just the specific things he teaches and preaches, though these are certainly part of it. Most of all, his word is the revelation of God that he brings.

Some accept this revelation, and some don't. And some profess to accept it, but they don't really remain in it. I've already spoken about some of the reasons why. We could add to these the fact that remaining in Jesus' word requires you to stay open to further revelation and deeper understanding of who Jesus is and what he wants to do in your life. If you truly want to follow Jesus in the way of discipleship, then he's continually trying to stretch you and challenge you and take you further and further into his self-emptying pattern of faithfulness, his dying and rising. Jesus wants to see how truly open and loyal you are to him. He doesn't want you to be under any illusions about the absolute necessity of continuing in this relationship with him.

He also doesn't want us to be under any illusions about the decline in the church, the community of disciples, especially here in our country. As I indicated earlier, larger and larger numbers of people consider themselves religiously unaffiliated. They don't identify themselves with any particular faith, including Christianity. And lots of those who once identified with Christianity have become disconnected from the faith or have dropped out. Part of what this means is that nominalism itself is on the decline. Fewer and fewer people are even claiming the name Christian.

In one respect, this is bad news, because it points to the continuing decline of Christian influence in our culture. But at the same time, it's good news, because it means we live in the midst of an opportunity. An opportunity to focus on what makes the Christian life distinct. An opportunity for renewal in the church. An opportunity to be a faithful minority instead of a complacent majority. An opportunity to consider what it means to be a true disciple of Jesus. An opportunity to ask ourselves if we're really serious about following him. An opportunity, as one person has put it, to remember that "people need to see that "Christian" isn't just a check-box on a questionnaire, but it's a life changed by the gospel."²

¹ Elizabeth Bryant, "Europeans 'De-Baptize' in Growing Numbers, Church Officials Worried." HuffPost website. January 18, 2012. Accessed July 10, 2019 <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/europeans-de-baptize-church_n_1214256?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAEsgQI9NEJ6vWb5kf3V9sr_duD00EacW4DJVcQ5uEIgTS0vtnZF2pw1u4ZcA04CD7BgVVNjNvIwRqn87fQN1HbIltJYZfEaXGtYXeO_q7SomQkjjoJLak5ZUgM0N7RbfzzyMw8dYXqzy_dX2F8GtKWcmQLdF8j5gJkWTayRDuyK4>.

² Ed Stetzer, "Nominal Nation—The Shift Away from Self-Identified Christianity." The Exchange website. February 8, 2016. Accessed July 13, 2019 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/february/nominal-nation-shift-away-from-christianity.html>>.