

NEW YEAR, SAME PROMISES: “*God’s Promise of New Life*”

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 01/12/20

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

I don’t read a lot of fiction, but recently I read a story about Sam, a man who went to volunteer for the first time at homeless shelter for men.

He received a minimal amount of training, but not how to report for duty. So, not knowing what else to do, he just got in line with the rest of the guys.

He was taken aback when he was mistaken for a client.

He said, “I was mistaken for being “one of them” one of those people whose bad decisions had derailed their lives, who had done something so that their own families were not willing to help them out.”

Put in theological terms, Jack got flustered because she had been mistaken for a sinner, when he had done absolutely nothing wrong.

The day Jesus showed up at the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist, it was just the opposite.

The place was filled with sinners – from Jerusalem and from the countryside. They hoped that John could clean them up and turn their lives around.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel has several supplements for their Thursday paper for the suburbs. In the supplement was a map that included a map with the locations of incidents to which the police were called.

Then you go to the corresponding number and find out the details of the police call. The Waunakee Tribune has something similar.

Drunk driving, bad checks, petty larceny, assault.

Those that came to see John that day were guilty. Crimes you’d see in some of our newspapers. But in Jesus’ day, they received word about a new chance; chance for a new life; a chance to start off clean; they knew they were not clean. They had no illusions about their own innocence.

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Then Jesus showed up and got in line with them. No one knew anything about him yet. He simply took his place in line and waited his turn.

It was after the baptism that the controversy began. When the heavens opened up and when the voice from heaven made clear who this Jesus was, people began to ask, what was Jesus doing in a line of sinners?

I’ve felt for a long time that the Christian church has had a difficult time with the baptism of Jesus. Matthew, for example, elaborates on Mark’s story, adding that John tried to talk Jesus out of being baptized.

If Jesus had listened to his public relations people, he would have been more like Jack wanted to be – a friend to sinners, a kind of loving helper, but never mistaken for one of them.

Jesus’ “handlers” would have never let him be baptized. Even if his intentions were good, it would ruin his reputation.

Gossip being what it was, and people being as they are, who wasn’t going to believe that Jesus had at least a few things to get off his conscience before he went into his public ministry?

You see the problem. Christians spend a lot of time talking about God’s love for sinners, but we go through a lot of trouble trying to not be mistaken for one.

The Baptism that Jesus experienced and the baptism infants receive are not as much about forgiveness as they are identity. That’s why I make the sign of the cross on each person identified.

The mark and the promise of New Life is the way – maybe the only way – that you and I can see each other – this world – and God aright.

We are people who have fallen short – like all of those lined up to see John the Baptist. The depth of our fall may or may not be different than others – in God’s eyes that doesn’t matter.

Because in this New Life we understand that each person, no matter what are worthy of God’s love, because Jesus stood in line with them -- with us.