

The Love from God Involved in Real “Old Time Religion” Baptismal Waters

Matthew 3:14-17

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“Come and listen to a story about a man named Jed, poor mountaineer, barely kept his family fed. Then, one day, he was shootin’ at some food, and up through the ground come a bubblin’ crude: Oil, that is, black gold, Texas tea. Well, the first thing ya know, ol’ Jed’s a millionaire. The kinfolk said, ‘Jed, move away from there.’ So they loaded up the truck, and they moved to Beverly – Hills, that is: swimmin’ pools, movie stars . . .” Written and composed by Paul Henning in 1962, “The Ballad of Jed Clampett” sets up every episode of the situation-comedy television series which was originally broadcast on CBS from 1962 to 1971. You and I might say that Jed was “country naïve;” yet whatever the reason, Jed never fell in love with the money; therefore he never lost his love for people and for each person who is blessed with the gift of God’s universal grace made personal. For example, in one 1965 episode, Jed’s nephew Jethro, worrying that he might disappoint his uncle, tells him, “Uncle Jed, I decided I ain't gonna be a brain surgeon.” With respect for Jethro, Jed replies: “Well, I reckon I can bear up under that.” Jed never fell in love with the money, and therefore he never lost his love for people and for each person who is blessed with the gift of God’s universal grace made personal. The same cannot be said, however, about religious faith traditions and church people. Debates and arguments occur related to opinions about “truth,” about being “right” or correct; debates and arguments occur about how power or authority will be used by those who have the “truth” or the “right belief;” and debates and arguments occur about discriminating against or banishing “your group,” because “my group” has the truth or the correct practice which your group does not. Before concluding this preaching, we will return to Jed Clampett, but first, Matthew’s presentation of Jesus’ baptism. With the possible exception of “who is saved?” and “how is a person saved?” baptism may have been argued about more than any other religious topic among Christians. According to Matthew’s Gospel account, a questioning on the topic of baptism occurs at least as early as when Jesus comes to John, the Wilderness-Preacher, and asks to be baptized. John argues that Jesus should baptize him (John) rather than the way Jesus suggests. Jesus argues back, until John relents and goes ahead and baptizes him. And Jesus’ reason: that his baptism is a crucial step toward the fulfillment of God’s righteousness.

Some have argued that in order for a person to be “safe in God’s salvation,” that person must be baptized. Some go further to argue that baptism only “works” – only is effective – if administered by church clergy, OR only if administered with a certain method. Given such arguments, we do well to ask: “What is the baseline, from Scripture and our broad interpretation of Scripture in relation to Jesus?” If our baseline and broad interpretation of Scripture in relation to Jesus is that Jesus represents the love of God embodied in a chosen human life, then salvation needs to be considered as created by God – by God who is not bound to human religious tradition, theology, argument, and/or practice. Many Baptists and Presbyterians have generally believed this across decades and centuries, that salvation is created by God, and, therefore, baptism is not required for salvation. Other groups have tended to have a more exclusive understanding of baptism and salvation, such as Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Church of Christ, and certain Presbyterians and Baptists. Yet these branches of Christianity also have their dissenters who do not share a traditional, a majority, or a long-time belief with their religious faith community, such as that baptism is essential (and required) for someone to know that God is reaching out to create and establish their salvation.

In 1992, maverick Baptist minister and Mississippi native Will Campbell (1924-2013) wrote a novel entitled, “The Glad River.” The title is taken from two Scriptures: (1) Psalm 46:4, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God;” and (2) Revelation 22:1-2, “The river of the Water of Life flows from God’s throne through the middle of the street of the city.” Yet the baptism of the central character in the novel does not occur in a river. It occurs in a jail cell. It does not happen by immersion beneath the water, but by water being poured over the head of the central character. And the one performing the baptism is no clergy person, but a man sentenced to die in the electric chair. Before you say, “That’s too weird,” remember that Jesus himself was sentenced to die in the location where and by the method which the State employed in executions for those judged guilty of capital crimes, whether the judgment of guilty was correct or not. That’s one indication that maverick Baptist minister Will Campbell was convinced that the “accepted church tradition” for most 20th century Baptists of baptism by immersion under the water was not essential for a

baptism to be considered worthy or effective in God's eyes. How did Will Campbell arrive at that belief? He researched the first European Baptists from the late 1400s and first half of the 1500s. He researched the real "old time religion" of his Baptist faith tradition. Those folks, called "Anabaptists," baptized sometimes by immersion in a river, pond, or canal, but frequently by pouring, partly because their radical faith for being a community of Jesus' followers included an allegiance to Jesus greater than and superseding any allegiance to a State government or a church establishment. They were Baptists (or Anabaptists) who often baptized in the rooms where they gathered in secret in order to avoid arrest by those who considered their radical faith to be treasonous to State and/or Church authority.

For Will Campbell and those European Baptists of the 1400s and 1500s, "community" as in "faith community" or "church" is never based in a domineering expression of authority, but is always based in the embodiment and expression of God's love in its basic form as perceived in Jesus. Period. Jesus is at the heart of what some call, "that old time religion." Church theology, church practice, or church authority according to my definition or yours or anyone else's – even if we call it "that old time religion" – church theology, practice, or authority is never at the heart of "real"/ authentic "old time religion" which is radical still today with Jesus at its heart. Within the story maverick Baptist minister Will Campbell tells in "The Glad River," a key pair of questions posed is this: "Is your life being transformed for community by the love of God embodied in Jesus? OR, is your life being misshapen by your love of the way you experience or understand God's love?" Our lives are misshapen by our own experiences and understandings (or beliefs) about God's love whenever we insist that others must love God as we do, others must be baptized the way we are practicing baptism, or that others must express loyalty to the government the way we think the best Christians should always express loyalty to the government.

More than the water of baptism in the Jordan River, in the Brazos River, in the National Cathedral, the Millican Baptist Church, a prison cell in Cummings, Louisiana, (more than the water of baptism anywhere) is the transformative power of the One who identifies with us through the experience of deliverance beyond the waters. That's why a baptismal prayer or song often mentions Creation and Exodus, as well as Jesus' own baptism. Being delivered from what any culture endorses or mandates – even what a religion within a culture endorses or mandates – being delivered is the key. Jed Clampitt is not Jesus, but he is likely a more true-to-form example of who Jesus desires for God's people to be "in community" than many leaders and rulers and religious loyalists exemplify. Why? Because Jed never falls in love with the money, and therefore he never loses his love for people and for each person who is blessed with the gift of God's universal grace made personal. If we fall in love with money, or our way of understanding and experiencing a religious faith tradition, and "who is saved? and who is not saved?" and "how much water? and in what way water is used for baptism," etc. – if we fall in love with these issues – we end up with lives misshapen because we've been insisting that others must love God the way we understand or experience God's love. If, though, we are shaped and transformed for community by the love of God in Jesus, and this alone, all our human, religious, political, and other differences will matter far, far less.

Robert Benton was born in Waxahachie, Texas, in 1932. In 1984, he wrote the screenplay for and directed the movie, "Places in the Heart," the setting for which was a place like Waxahachie in the years of The Great Depression. The movie opens with a church choir singing Fanny Crosby's hymn, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine." The story of the movie orbits around relationships influenced and divided by race, ethnicity, gender, economic status, and violence. In this movie, those who decline to be "baptized" by the untransformed values of the culture where they live experience being transformed for community together with others who are not uniformly alike. Their experience of being transformed can be described by the words of the movie's opening song: "Filled with God's goodness, lost in God's love – This is my story, this is my song: Praising my Savior all the day long." Do we love too much the particular way we think and experience love from God is shared? Or do we love enough God, who shares gracious love extravagantly and vulnerably for human communal transformation? Those are possibly the two most important questions for all who wonder about following Jesus, who came to John that he might be baptized: Not do we love enough baptism, or any other cultural or religious practice or theology or authority? Do we love enough God, who shares gracious love extravagantly and vulnerably for human communal transformation? God, help us to love enough not our cultures or religion. God, help us to love enough God and all of God's people. That's the real "old time religion" Jesus came to share and reveal. – All honor and praise be to God.